

Three ways to create sacred moments at home this Advent

In chaotic times, focus on routine, ritual, and simplicity.

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Yesterday my eight-year-old son and I were in my office at church when a parishioner pulled into the parking lot. “Put on your mask, sweetie,” I said. My son, whose world has become very small over these pandemic months, looked around anxiously. “I can’t find it, Mama, but it’s OK. I’ll just hold my breath.” I found his mask and helped him put it on, but his words stuck with me the rest of the day. How life has changed for our children. How strange their days have become. Like every mother I know, I desperately want to make things easier for my children. I don’t want them to have to hold their breath.

Those who observe the season of Advent—maybe especially those of us with young children—are looking for ways to create a meaningful home practice in these chaotic times. What I’ve found as a pastor, mother, and someone who’s given years to studying and developing home faith practices, is that my best strategy is to focus

with intention on routine, ritual, and simplicity.

1. Add meaning to your existing routines.

Lately, when I ask what routines parents have in their daily lives, I hear some variation of, “our lives are completely disheveled. We are constantly out of sorts.” I’ve felt this many days myself, and yet, all of our lives have some degree of routine, no matter how untethered. Cognitive science teaches us that it’s easier to tack a new routine onto a routine we already have, so something as simple as putting on pajamas can be your cue. This Advent, every time you put on pajamas, say, “thank you, God, for this day. Help me find peace and rest tonight.” Do it for a week and see if it becomes routine.

Do you drink coffee in the morning? Could you take a few minutes then to list off the blessings of that day? Maybe it’ll be just you looking out at the leaves or snow falling. Or maybe you’ll have children with you, donning chocolatey mustaches and fishing out soggy marshmallows from the bottom of the mug as they list their reasons to be grateful.

2. Create rituals that remind you God is near.

When we’re all homebound and isolated, we need to create things to look forward to—for our health and wellbeing, and for our spiritual wellness, too. This Advent and Christmas will be very different than any we’ve ever experienced before. As I anticipate Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, I don’t know what it will look like, but I do know it won’t be a crowded sanctuary where we’re snuggled in pews shoulder to shoulder and singing "Silent Night" with our candles. That is a ritual I have grown to dearly love over the years, and I grieve the loss.

And yet, as I plan for my congregation and for my family, I wonder if the Holy Spirit might be whispering something in my ear: *mark this moment in a new way*. This year, it might just be you, holding a candle, singing "Silent Night" quietly and to yourself as tears fall. Instead of fearing that moment or willing it to be different, know that God will be with you there, in that quiet stillness.

Maybe your family will be there too, and you can read the words of the nativity story in Luke 2 out loud: “She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.” On a clear night, bundle up (if it’s cold where you live) and take a nighttime star walk. So much of the Advent and Christmas story is

guided by stars and walking. Remember the journey to Bethlehem and the Magi's journey. Breathe in the night air and gaze upon the wonder of the stars.

Family ritual is about creating a sense of ceremony and celebration, to say "God is here, with us." This can be as simple as lighting a single candle for each of the four weeks of Advent—for hope, peace, joy, and love—or saying a prayer on the longest night of the year. This year, the message we remember and teach our children is that this year belongs to God, too, though it is difficult, perhaps unimaginably so.

3. Simplify your best-loved traditions.

The finest restaurants serve the simplest things, perfectly prepared. The best designs have been edited and cleaned up and scaled down so they look effortless. This is my philosophy when it comes to faith practice at home. You don't need a bookshelf full of resources or a craft drawer that's overflowing with materials; you need some simple ideas and a commitment to follow them through.

When you're trimming your tree, have each person pick an ornament off the tree and tell a story of what it means to them and why it's important. Offer a Christmas tree blessing with these simple words: God who created all things, bless this tree as we decorate it and make it a joyful symbol for our home. May its branches remind us of the shelter and shade you provide for us and for many creatures. May its trunk remind us of your strength, and may its lights bring us peace. May we remember your gift to us this season, the gift of baby Jesus. Amen.

Another very simple Advent practice is to find yourself in the nativity story. If you have a creche or a nativity scene, turn your eyes toward it for a few minutes. Which character catches your attention? What would it be like to be there? What do you imagine the characters seeing or feeling?

This Advent and Christmas will be different than any Advent and Christmas we've ever experienced. Let's give ourselves the gifts of routine, ritual, and simplicity so we can experience the holidays without holding our breath.