



Family Christmas Traditions

THAT FOCUS ON JESUS

By Val Robb from Inspiringwriting.co

I pray this will be a blessing to your family.

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[6 Engaging Writing Activities for Christmas](#)

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Christmas lights, Christmas carols, gifts, the aroma of cookies baking and roast dinners cooking, and special times with family all make Christmas an exciting and magical season for our children.

At the same time, crass commercialization that focuses our children's minds on the presents they want to get can smother the wonder that God came as a baby to live among us.

In the midst of all the busyness of the season, as well as the tempting distractions of consumerism, I realized early on that I needed to be intentional about our Christmas celebrations. I wanted Christmas to be a time to focus on the incredible gift of Jesus and to build our children's character while creating warm, fun family traditions.

Sondra Burnett's book, *Celebrate With Joy - Transform Your Christmas Season*, inspired me to consider the power of traditions:

"Traditions are born from the special things we cherish as a family. They reinforce our family's personality and link us with our past and future. Traditions create security for our children, for the whole family. A tradition performed in the right spirit spreads a warm glow throughout the year... Consider special family times as investments in your children's future... They can draw from their "memory banks" filled with the riches of a life of love and togetherness." (p.76-77)

I'm excited to share some of the ways our family has used the Christmas season to create special family traditions while learning to treasure Jesus and share His love with others. I hope something here will inspire your creativity as you think about what might work well in your family.

Please Note: We do not do **all** of these things every year. I am just sharing a variety of ideas that we've tried over many years in case one or more might suit your family.

1) Christmas traditions that help us treasure Jesus

- **Advent Candles in a Wreath**

Some churches, starting with the First Sunday of Advent, light a candle which is sometimes set in a wreath, and accompany it with a prayer and a short devotional. An additional candle is lit each Sunday before Christmas until, by the last Sunday before the special day, all four candles are lit. Some Advent wreaths include a fifth, "Christ" candle which can be lit on Christmas Day.

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We sometimes followed this tradition in our home as well, lighting the candle, singing a carol, and adding a short Bible reading. We didn't do this every year, but when we did, I found it got us thinking ahead about the meaning of the season, helping to set our hearts on Jesus right from the beginning.

We briefly discussed the symbolism. "The circle of the wreath stands for eternity and God's constant presence with us. It pictures His unending love for us. The evergreens symbolize everlasting life in Christ and growth in His image. The candles remind us that Jesus is the Light of the World." (Burnett, p.13).

Tip: Let the children light and blow out the candle and have fun with the wax before you start lest they be distracted. Ask me how I know!

- **Advent Calendars**

Advent Calendars with little flaps to lift up for each of the 24 days leading up to Christmas added meaning and fun to our Christmas celebrations. Most years my mother-in-law gave us one that featured the Christmas story.

One year I invested in a reusable Advent calendar with 3D items which depict the Christmas story. The items Velcro-ed onto the burlap background, and the kids enjoyed adding each one to the Christmas scene. Adding the wooden baby Jesus on Christmas Day completed the picture.



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I also used an Advent calendar with a small pocket for each day. In each pocket I put a note for an activity that day. I included things like read a Christmas book together, sing a Christmas carol, bake cookies today, make Christmas cards, go to a Christmas concert, or whatever we had planned. Our children loved participating in these calendar activities.



- **Jesse Tree**

The Jesse Tree is based on Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots." This tradition is a way to review the unfolding story of redemption in the Old Testament, showing how it connects with Jesus' coming to fulfill God's promises to send a redeemer.

Jesse was King David's father and the shoot and root refer to the Messiah that would come from David's line. So the Jesse Tree is like the family tree of Jesus, pointing us to Him.

The idea is to review Bible stories of the people who are in Jesus' family tree and to see how God was working out His plan of salvation right from the beginning. A short, engaging novel that explains the Jesse tree is *The Jesse Tree* by Geraldine McCaughrean.

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Lots of ideas for the Scriptures and pictures that depict the stories can be found online. We used a simple version with pictures that we colored, laminated, and stuck on a tree poster. **This link** shows a short video of Ann Voskamp sharing how she uses the Jesse Tree tradition with her family.

- **Names of Jesus**

To treasure Jesus and remember what an amazing gift He is, we adopted an idea from Sondra Burnett's Celebrate With Joy and focused on various names of Jesus during Advent. Each day of Advent we would consider one of His names, read a verse related to that name, and have a short discussion before ending with prayer.

Initially, I found little objects to represent the names, gift-wrapped them, and placed them in a wicker basket. Each day the children enjoyed opening one and having our short devotional center on that name.

Examples:

- The Door (John 10:7) represented by Lego door
- Light of the World (John 6:12) shown by a candle
- Bright and Morning Star (Numbers 24:17, Rev. 22:5,16) represented by a star decoration
- Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8, 22:13) shown by Alphabet magnet letters A and Z
- Good Shepherd (John 10:14) used a candy cane for a shepherd's staff
- Lamb of God (John 1:29) represented by a lamb from a farm set
- Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5) symbolized by toy lion
- King of Kings (Revelation 19:16) symbolized by a toy crown.
- Savior (Philippians 3:20) used a cross.

Good discussions grew from these names. For example, Why is Jesus called the Door? The door to what? How does a door protect us? How does a door help us?"

When our oldest children became teens, we sometimes got them to choose a name of Jesus and prepare a short devotional to share with the family.

One year I found a special Christmas decoration set that highlighted the names of Jesus, and we still use this. Unfortunately, it's no longer available for purchase.

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I have a little Christmas tree that we keep just for the names of Jesus ornaments. These decorations have served as great conversation starters for sharing the Gospel with guests



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- **Christmas books**

There are many special Christmas books for children which help bring out the meaning of Jesus' coming. One beautifully illustrated one which reviews the whole story of the Bible and why Jesus needed to come is *One Wintry Night* by Ruth Bell Graham.

Other family favorites are:

- *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson
- *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* by Susan Wojciechowski
- *Jesus' Christmas Party* by Nicholas Allan
- *The Small One* by Alex Walsh
- *The Jesse Tree* by Geraldine McCaughrean
- *Jotham's Journey* by Arnold Ytreeide
- *The Candymaker's Gift* by David and Helen Haidle

2) Christmas traditions that share the joy of Jesus with others

- Christmas cookie gifts—Some years we baked cookies and took them to our neighbors along with a brief decorative note about why Jesus' birth is special to our family.



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- Birthday gift for Jesus—Each December we choose one or two projects to give to, usually one local and one overseas. Each child would decide on an amount to give and my husband and I would match the total. Then we would send this to the chosen charity. As the children got older, we let them suggest projects to give to. Now that they are all adults, we still practice this tradition.

Sometimes we also each thought of a gift for Jesus in terms of a character quality we decided to particularly work on throughout the year. We chose a verse or two that would help us grow in this.

- Christmas hospitality—Most years we invited international students or other international friends for a Christmas meal, usually on the 22nd or 23rd, taking the opportunity to explain the meaning of Christmas and sing some carols together after dinner. Our kids helped prepare food, welcome the guests, play their instruments, or supported our efforts in other ways. Often we invited our guests to bring some food to share, and they enjoyed contributing.
- Some of our friends would host a birthday party for Jesus, inviting friends and explaining about Jesus' birth, and telling the reason for the Christmas season.
- Christmas cards—We would often make or buy meaningful Christmas-themed cards and write messages to friends and family.

3) Create family traditions and warm memories

- **Gift giving:** We tried to keep it simple and thoughtful. As well as giving gifts to the children, we encouraged them to give gifts to their siblings and close friends. Experiencing the joy of giving blessed them. Since we have a large family, we had the kids draw a name, keep it a secret, and just buy one nice gift for that sibling. As well as learning to choose a meaningful gift, the kids enjoyed trying to figure out who had whose name.

When choosing gifts for the children, I tried to think of how to encourage them in their talents and interests. While sometimes giving toys, I often gave tools to encourage their interests and skills. Depending on the interests and age of the child, that might be a recipe book, a hammer and nails, a beautiful journal, a book for stamp collecting, seeds to plant, garden tools, history DVDs, a sketchbook and art pencils, other art supplies, sewing supplies, or a game that fit their interests. I still continue my tradition of giving each child a book each Christmas—one tailored to their interests.

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- **Shepherd's Meal**

Our favorite Christmas tradition is one I borrowed and adapted from Sally Clarkson. On Christmas Eve we have a simple meal of soup and homemade bread and imagine we are the shepherds on the night the angels announced Jesus' birth. My husband would read the Christmas story from Luke 2. When he got to the part about the shepherds searching for Jesus, the kids would hunt for a little figure of baby Jesus which my husband had hidden.

When the kids were younger they enjoyed dressing up as shepherds, too. After the baby was found, we read the end of the story and reflected on the wonder of the first Christmas. Then we would sing a couple of carols, open our gifts and eat special Christmas treats. Although our kids are all adults now, we still hide the figure of baby Jesus, since it's become an ingrained tradition that we all treasure. The nostalgia makes it worthwhile, though when our grandson is old enough to join the hunt, it will be special in a fresh way.

Important Note: While it's wonderful to establish traditions and create memories, things don't always go as planned. If you try something and it doesn't go well, don't be discouraged and give up.

I remember once when lighting the candles for our Christmas wreath, I got annoyed and scolded the kids when they started playing with the wax and the flickering candles. The ambiance spoiled on both accounts! Afterward I was sad that it hadn't been the cozy reverent time I'd hoped for. (Thus the note above about giving the kids time for some supervised candle exploration before the devotional time. 😊) Fortunately, we can always apologize and start again.

Another time on Christmas Eve we had an overflowing toilet which did nothing for the atmosphere! However, after the mess was cleaned up, we still managed to enjoy our Christmas treats and gift-giving. Now we laugh about the messy memory.

The ideals in my mind didn't always play out in practice. Sometimes I attempted too many traditions in one year. Other times we were in the midst of moving abroad and things got chaotic. But overall we have lots of warm memories and treasured traditions. Keeping Jesus and his values central has been worth the effort.

Conclusion: As Sondra Burnett says, "Live thoughtfully. Live deliberately. Do not simply get caught up with living life. Plan to communicate your values to your children through your special times together. ...Celebrate with a purpose." (p. 77)

Enjoy your children, and have fun teaching them about the wonder of Jesus' coming as you celebrate Christmas together.

For a handy reference guide of these ideas, [click here](#)