

Consider traveling by a different route. Maybe that means taking the back way home from work or stopping by that roadside attraction as you return from Grandmother's house. Let the new journey remind you that we are to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Have mealtime devotions

Each of the 12 days of Christmas, spend some time during a meal for family reflection. Ask questions. Share concerns. Tell stories. Give thanks. Sense the presence of Jesus among you.

Pray for the persecuted

Those of us privileged to live in places where we are free to pursue our faith sometimes forget there are people in other places whose celebrations of Christmas could come at the cost of their freedom or lives. Read about Christians being persecuted for their faith in places like Syria and Nigeria, a pastor recently imprisoned in North Korea, and others. Then take some special time to pray for them.

Record aha moments

Christmas can be a time of important moments you do not want to forget. A quiet moment with a relative may remind you of the importance of family. A worship service may give you new insight into how to live as a follower of Jesus. A frustrating experience in a store may encourage you to be more patient. Write those insights some place you can return in the weeks and months ahead for a reminder.



Plant a tree

At Christmas, we celebrate the gift of new, eternal life we have received in Christ. The evergreen trees we decorate are a symbol of everlasting life. Planting a tree or caring for the earth in another way can serve as a wonderful reminder of our call to be people who celebrate life.

Begin a faithful intention

Many people make New Year's Resolutions to lose weight or give up an unhealthy habit. Consider a faithful intention this year to help you grow in your spiritual life. Rather than waiting until Jan. 1 to begin, start during the Christmas season.

Be a person of peace

We may not be able to do much to promote world peace, but we have the power to make the world around us more peaceful. Spend the 12 days of Christmas practicing ways you can eliminate harsh words, anger, and other negative attitudes from your life.



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What is Advent?

The word “Advent” derives from the Latin “adventus,” meaning “coming.” During its earliest observances, Advent was 40 days of repentance, fasting, and prayer as new believers prepared for their baptisms. Oftentimes, these baptisms took place on the day of Epiphany--which is a day remembering the Magi’s visit to baby Jesus; it was a celebration of Jesus’ incarnation on Earth.

Later Christians began tying Advent not just to Christ’s incarnation, but to an anticipated second coming of Christ. Advent became a period for renewing the anticipation and longing for Jesus’ return.

Today, Advent is a period of preparation for both “advents”--or arrivals--of Jesus. Lester Ruth, a professor at Duke Divinity School and a historian of Christian worship, offered this distinction for Advent: “The simplest way I have to distinguish between Advent and Christmas is that advent uses the word “come” as a longing petition, expressed in anticipation, whereas Christmas is a commemorative reflection on how the Lord has come in Christ’s birth and thus the trigger for a new redemptive order has begun.”

In our culture, the close ties to Christmas seemingly outweigh the anticipation of another “advent” of Jesus. We conflate the Christmas commemoration and the anticipation of Advent. Ignoring this “second coming” removes some of the urgency of our Christian call to enact God’s love and justice on Earth.

What do we do for Advent?

It seems our Advent observances could benefit from a greater emphasis on the Advent that is yet to come, and a diminished emphasis on the Advent remembered in our Christmas celebrations (there’s time for that when Christmas actually arrives). So how can we re-orient ourselves towards longing this Advent?

One of the ways we reflect on Advent in communal worship is by utilizing an Advent wreath--a simple wreath surrounding four exterior candles and one central candle. The four exterior candles represent the hallmarks of a renewed creation: joy, hope, peace, and love. The central candle represents the presence of Christ. Each Sunday, one more of the exterior candles is lit. Finally, the Christ candle is lit as a reminder of Christ’s ongoing presence. We, of course, can bring this practice home, creating our own Advent wreaths and contemplating our own longings for more joy, hope, peace and love.

We also utilize music for reflection. Many songs communicate our Advent longings. Unfortunately, these songs are overshadowed during this season by songs that are explicitly Christmas-themed. Take a listen to some more Advent-aligned songs, listening for the expectations and longings they communicate. Check out our Advent playlist (with more input from Dr. Ruth).

Excerpt from What is Advent about?
By Ryan Dunn

Read the full article.



Celebrate 12 days of Christmas

By Joe Lovino,
UM Communications

With all the anticipation leading up to Dec. 25, it’s easy to forget that Christmas lasts until Jan. 6. Here are some suggestions for how Christians can celebrate all 12 days of Christmas.

Have a silent night

One evening, turn off everything electronic and share Christmas memories. Go through old photos. Watch family movies (you might need to turn on the television for that). Ask others to tell of their favorite family Christmas tradition, and a joy-filled memory of a Christmas past. Spend a few moments talking about the Christmas story and the characters with whom you most relate.

Sing the songs of Christmas

We sing many Christmas carols without thinking much about the words. Take some time to research the lyrics of songs as you sing them. Where is the author biblically accurate? Where did she or he take poetic license? This is a great way to learn the biblical accounts of the Christmas story and some of the symbolism used.

Remember the refugees

One of the crises in our world this year is the number of refugees risking their lives to leave war-torn nations to find places of safety and peace. If a church or another organization in your area is sponsoring refugees, find out how you can help. Offer your support and prayers.



Additionally, make efforts to be a person of radical hospitality by welcoming the stranger, giving food to the hungry, visiting church members who do not get out, and opening your home to family and friends who are alone.

Don’t return — give

Rather than returning the ugly sweater you’ll never wear or the kitchen gadget you’ll never use, give it away! Many places and individuals will benefit from those unwanted items. The sweater will keep someone warm, and the gadget will be sold in a secondhand store to generate funds for a ministry.

Pray through your un-decorating

As you put away the Christmas decorations, consider the symbols of the tree and evergreens, the Nativity, the wreath, and more. Pray that those these signs may get packed away for 11 months, the spirit of Christ will continue to be alive in you throughout the year ahead.

Travel by a different route

The Christmas story contains several journeys — Mary visits Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph travel to be taxed, the Wise Men follow the star to Bethlehem, and Jesus and his family move to Egypt when King Herod orders the slaughter of baby boys. Many of us go on special journeys over Christmas, in addition to the time we spend in the car every day.

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