

mal. The ox is believed to represent patience while the ass connotes humility.

#### The animals watch over Christ

The animals are often seen hovering over the Christ Child, as though to warm him with their breath.

#### Lambs

Having accompanied the shepherds, lambs are almost always present. The lamb symbolizes purity and points toward Jesus' sacrificial death upon the cross.

#### A rooster

The rooster is sometimes included as a symbol of vigilance, and foreshadows the cock crowing three times on the night of Jesus' betrayal.

#### A dog

The dog is believed to embody faithfulness and loyalty.

#### Columns

The presence of Roman or Greek columns, often as ruins, depicts Christianity's triumph over the pagan world. Also illustrating Jesus' birth into both a Jewish and Hellenistic world, they reiterate the message that Christ came for all races and all cultures.

#### A well

The presence of a well signifies the purity of Jesus and references the waters of baptism.

#### Palm branches

Romans acknowledged the palm branch as a symbol of victory. In a nativity

scene, palms represent the branches waved on Christ's entry into Jerusalem and foretells his triumph over the grave.

#### Contemporary figures

The inclusion of contemporary figures in native clothing helps Christians of different cultures to relate personally to the events of the Holy Night.

#### Farmers, bakers, and candlestick makers

At times, figures representing common occupations are added to emphasize that Christ came for people from all walks of life.

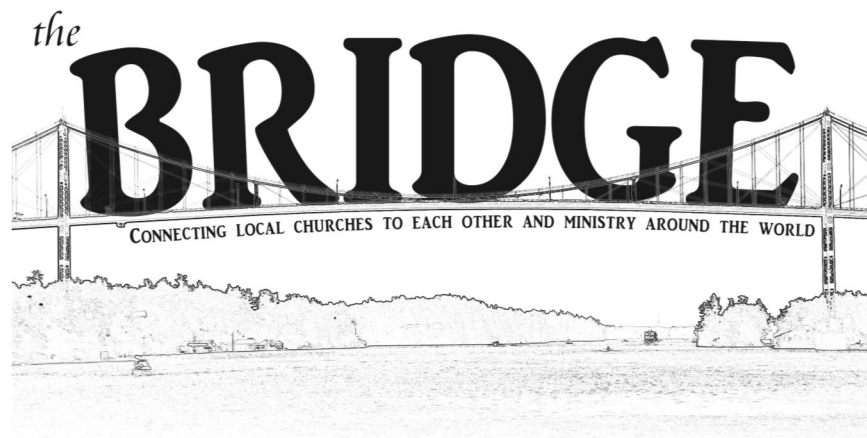
Families with children can read the Christmas story as they set up the manger scene, adding each character one-by-one and taking time to reflect on each figure and the role it plays in the Nativity.

Some people wait a week to add the Wise Men to their display to mark the time it would have taken for the Magi to travel to visit the Baby Jesus. Most churches celebrate the arrival of the Magi on Epiphany (January 6), the day immediately following the twelve days of Christmas.

Churches usually leave Nativity scenes on display until the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated a couple of weeks after Christmas.

We hope this information will make your Christmas more memorable, and you will share this story with others so they too can learn faith lessons from the figures in the crèche.

Find Information and resources about how to improve your church's digital discipleship at <https://www.unyumc.org/about/digital-discipleship>



The Upper New York Conference's vision is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and to be God's love with our neighbors in all places.

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[www.unyumc.org](http://www.unyumc.org)

# This year's Advent is one like no other

For many of us, Christmas preparations are steeped in tradition. We put the tree in the same place we did last year. We follow baking recipes handed down from our grandmothers. We find those ornaments the kids made when they were in pre-school. We go to the same parties, sing the same carols, and even have a favorite Christmas Eve service to attend. We like the routine of Christmas.

This year, however, things are different. Due to coronavirus restrictions, nothing feels routine.

The Church's season of Advent, the four

Sundays before Christmas, which began last Sunday Nov. 29, is an invitation to something new. We're waiting for Christ's birth. We're waiting for his return. We're waiting for the world to be transformed from brokenness to wholeness.

This Advent, hear the invitation to a new and deeper relationship with God, to the world yet to come, to the world as it should be.

You're invited!

Visit <https://bit.ly/UMCAgentiv> to access devotions, prayers, and activities for each week of Advent.



## Your nativity scene: more than meets the eye

By Lilla Marigza, UMCCom

Nativity scenes are a common sight at Christmastime but what could seem like a simple decoration actually has a lot of spiritual lessons if you look hard enough. St. Francis of Assisi created the first crèche in 1223, in an attempt to bring the focus of Christmas back to the birth of Christ and away from material, gift-giving customs.

United Methodist Jeanne Honeycutt has spent time researching the meaning behind variations in crèche displays. She and volunteers from First United Methodist Church in Tullahoma, Tenn. maintain a permanent Nativity museum at their church, which showcases more than 400 crèches. Honeycutt shared her research with us and explained the symbols listed below.

### Halos

The halo, or nimbus, has been used for centuries to denote deity. When appearing in Christian art, a halo symbolizes the light of God and a soul infused with God's spirit.

The halo also signifies God's "glory," from the Greek word *doxa*, meaning the shining brilliance of God.

### Jesus' outstretched arms

The Christ Child's outstretched arms reflect the invitation to salvation through him.

### Stable

Most scholars believe that the stable referred to in the Gospels was most likely a cave built into the rocks behind, or adjacent to, the inn, which illustrates the divine truth that the Son of God came down to the very heart of the earth to dwell among humanity. Later, the cave would be revered as Christ's burial place, from which he would be resurrected.

### Swaddling clothes

Swaddling clothes, as described in the New Testament, foretell Jesus' burial shroud.

### The Virgin Mary's gown

The Virgin Mary often wears a gown of

red, signifying lifeblood. Her mantle of blue represents the sky and heaven, conveying that she is the link between the human and the divine.

### Hands over heart

At times, Mary is seen with hands clasped over her heart, alluding to St. Luke's account: "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2: 19)

### Shepherds

The shepherds represent the common man. They also reference David, the shepherd who became king, and indicate Christ's ancestral lineage.

### The Good Shepherd

Throughout the Old Testament, God is often referred to as a shepherd: "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." (Isaiah 40: 11)

### The Magi

The three wise men, or Magi, are often

depicted as being three different ages — one young, one middle-aged, and one elderly — relating to the three stages of life.

### Gifts of the Magi

The gifts the Magi bring to Christ also take on significance. Gold indicates Christ's kingship, incense symbolizes his divinity, and myrrh foreshadows his death.

### Nationalities of the Magi

The Magi are often portrayed as coming from three geographical and cultural areas — Asia, Africa, and Europe — referring to the three known continents at the time.

### The Magi's animals

The animals that carry the Magi to Bethlehem vary as well. You may see them riding a horse from Europe, a camel from Asia, or an elephant from Africa.

### The stable animals

The ox and ass illustrate that Christ is the king of all creation, both human and ani-

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