



# OBSERVING THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR YEAR

The Cycle of Light

## THE CYCLE OF LIGHT

*A time for celebrating the Incarnation*

ADVENT – Wait

CHRISTMAS – Wonder

EPIPHANY – Inhabit & Tell

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## **About the Cycle of Light**

(Celebrating the Incarnation-God with us)

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### *Advent (A season of waiting)*

Advent marks the start of the church year and begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. It originated as a period of fasting in preparation for the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas). It is helpful to remember that in Advent we are not simply waiting for the coming of Christmas. We are ultimately waiting for the second coming of Christ.

Observance of Advent generally includes rethinking our priorities, realigning our lives with God's desires for us, seeking forgiveness, and starting anew. To spend the weeks before Christmas in this manner goes radically against our culture but serves to remind us that we are waiting for Christ.

Each of the four Sundays of Advent typically has a watchword associated with it.

- First Sunday – Wait/Expectation
- Second Sunday – Prepare/Hope
- Third Sunday – Rejoice/Joy
- Fourth Sunday – Love/Purity

The color of Advent is purple, the color of royalty in ancient times, which symbolizes looking forward to welcoming the coming of a King.

### *Christmas (A season of celebration)*

Christmas is a celebration of God himself come to earth to save us from sin and death and to rescue us to himself. It's the commemoration of the birth of the Word, the Light of the World, the Son of God. Christmas is certainly good news of great joy (Luke 2:10).

Unbeknownst to many, Christmas is not merely a single day in the church calendar but a season. Its twelve days of feast span from Christmas Day through Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

The color of Christmas is white which symbolizes innocence, purity, joy, triumph, and glory. The white is often embellished with gold.

*Epiphany (A season for seeing more of Christ's glory)*

Epiphany is a season for celebrating the good news of the coming of God the Son for the whole earth. Beginning on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany runs through the Sunday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday.

The term "Epiphany" comes from the Greek verb *phainein* which means "to cause to appear" or "to bring to light." This season is associated with the coming of the Magi.

Three events in the life of Christ are associated with the Feast of the Epiphany:

- The visit of the wise men from the East
- The baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River
- The turning of water into wine at Cana

Epiphany is a season for seeing more of Christ's glory by focusing on His life and mission. It is a time to both inhabit the Story and to tell the Story.

The color of Epiphany is white which symbolizes purity and joy.

***FOR TO US A CHILD IS BORN,  
TO US A SON IS GIVEN;  
AND THE GOVERNMENT SHALL BE UPON HIS SHOULDER,  
AND HIS NAME SHALL BE CALLED  
WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD,  
EVERLASTING FATHER, PRINCE OF PEACE.***

Isaiah 9:6

## Ideas for Observing the Cycle of Light

*This is a list of possible options for celebrating the days and seasons of the Cycle of Light. Whether you choose to celebrate this Cycle one time or several, make each year meaningful by selecting options that speak to you and your family. Directions and/or explanations can be found for many of these ideas by searching the internet.*

### *Advent –*

The season of thoughtful reflection and repentance.

- Make or purchase an Advent Wreath.
- Attend Advent services.
- Begin a schedule of daily Advent readings. Below are a few suggestions to choose from:
  - *From Heaven* by A. W. Tozer
  - *Good News of Great Joy* by John Piper
  - *Watch for the Light* by C. S. Lewis
  - *The Dawning of Indestructible Joy* by John Piper
  - *Come, Let Us Adore Him* by Paul Tripp
  - *The One True Gift* by Tim Chester
  - *Grafted In* by Amy Gannett
  - *The Advent Project* by Biola University
  - Advent Study Books by She Reads Truth and He Reads Truth
- Set up a nativity. Leave the manger empty until Christmas Day.
- Visit a live nativity.
- Make a Jesse tree.
- Incorporate a purchased or handmade Advent Calendar into your celebration.
- For younger children, use a Countdown to Jesus' Birthday Advent Calendar.
- Make an Advent Paper Chain.
- Participate in an Advent service project individually, as a family or with friends.
- Engage in Advent Random Acts of Kindness.
- Decide on the recipient of a family gift. Provide "shepherd's pouches" for each family member so each can "save" money to be given toward the gift.

- Adopt a family for Christmas.
- Fast from certain foods, saving your enjoyment of them for Christmas. (Optional: Break the fast on Sundays.)
- Decorate a mantle or table. (Optional: Wait until December 24th to decorate for Christmas or decorate slowly throughout the month.)
- Give yourself permission to sing (Isaiah 65:17-25).
- Allow yourself to groan (Romans 8:18-25).
- Practice restraint:
  - Skip mailing Christmas cards and send Easter greetings instead.
  - Rather than purchasing gifts, make a charitable donation in the name of your loved one(s).
  - Decline a holiday party or two.
  - Cut back on baking goods and/or eat fewer Christmas goodies.
- Practice retreat (rather than continually being on the "Go"):
  - Spend some time alone.
  - Schedule times of quiet and reflection.
  - Sit for a time at the feet of Jesus.
- Assume an alert and open posture:
  - Ask God to heighten your awareness of His presence.
  - Plead with Him to open your eyes to what He is doing—in you and in the world.
  - Meditate on the example of Mary's open posture in Luke 1:38.

#### First Sunday of Advent (Four Sundays before Christmas Day)

- Light the first candle of the advent wreath on this evening. (Purple)
- Say a short prayer when lighting the candle.
- Read and meditate on Psalm 130:5-6.

#### Second Sunday of Advent

- Light an additional candle on this Sunday evening. (Purple)
- Read and meditate this week on Luke 1:76-79.

### Third Sunday of Advent

- Light an additional candle on the Advent wreath. (Pink)
- Read and mediate on Luke 1:46-49.
- Send an annual Christmas letter. (A way of reflecting on the past year.) Joyfully notice the ways God has been present and faithful in your life and the way you have been able to be part of God's work in your corner of the world.

### Fourth Sunday of Advent

- Light an additional candle on the Advent wreath. (Purple)
- Read and mediate on John 3:16.

### Christmas Eve

- Light the Christ candle in the center of the Advent wreath. (white)
- Attend Christmas Eve service.
- Hold a special family worship time.
- If possible, take the day off work.
- Hold a birthday celebration for Jesus on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.
- If your family has chosen to give a family gift, have everyone place their shepherd's pouches beside the manger of a special nativity scene. (Choose another time if all family is not able to be together on Christmas Eve.)

### *Christmas –*

The Season of celebration and wonder.

### Christmas Day (The Twelve Days of Christmas Begin)

- Light the white Christ candle in the center of your Advent wreath to mark the coming of the Light. Continue to light it each evening during Christmas.
- Read the account of Jesus' birth in Luke chapter 2.

## Christmas Season

- Purchase twelve ornaments, one for each day of Christmas. Consider choosing a theme for your ornaments: the nativity, the names of Jesus, the lineage of Christ, etc. Every evening during Christmas, choose an ornament and hang it on your Advent wreath or tree.
- Invite someone who is alone or far from home to Christmas Dinner on one of the twelve days of Christmas rather than on Christmas Day.
- Keep your tree and decorations up until the end of the season (January 6<sup>th</sup>).
- Send Christmas cards during the twelve days of Christmas.
- Celebrate with twelve days of Christmas gift giving—provide toys, school supplies, or personal care products for disadvantaged children.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen.
- Surprise your mail carrier, elderly neighbor, etc., with an inexpensive yet meaningful gift.
- Gather up your Christmas cards. Instead of throwing them out or recycling them, use them as prayer reminders during the coming year. Select a card each week and pray for that family.

## Boxing Day – December 26<sup>th</sup> (In honor of Stephen – Acts 6-8)

- Volunteer at a soup kitchen, food bank, or homeless shelter.

## New Year's Day – January 1<sup>st</sup> (Coincides with the Feast of the Holy Name)

- Sometime during the day meditate on His name, sing praises to His name, speak it, or reflect upon it.

## Eve of Epiphany – January 5<sup>th</sup> – Eve of Epiphany

- Host a Twelfth Night party.



## Epiphany –

A celebration of the good news of the coming of God the Son for the whole earth.

- Bring an intentional end to the Christmas season by taking down your Christmas tree and decorations.
- Prayerfully consider how you will be a witness of the Light of the World to those around you this season.
- As a concrete reminder, leave the porch light on or use electric candles in your windows throughout the season.
- Host a house blessing. With chalk write the following inscription on the lintel of the most used door in your home.  
20 C+M+B \_\_ (Last two digits of current calendar year)  
(The letters C+M+B abbreviate the Latin phrase *Christus mansionem benedicat*, "May Christ bless the house.")
- Invite a few people to get a glimpse of Jesus by joining you in a four- to six-week informal, investigative Bible study.
- Read an entire Gospel one or more times from start to finish absorbing the full narrative sweep of Christ's remarkable life.
- Read a book to sharpen your thinking about sharing your faith.
- Gather a few friends and serve together in a volunteer opportunity.
- Choose friends, coworkers, and family members to pray for during Epiphany.
- If someone appears open, invite them for coffee and some conversation about spiritual matters.
- Give a friend a thoughtful book on the Christian faith.

***AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US,  
AND WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY,  
GLORY AS OF THE ONLY SON FROM THE FATHER,  
FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH.***

John 1:14



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First Sunday of Advent – *Purple*

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Second Sunday of Advent – *Purple*

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Third Sunday of Advent – *Pink*

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Boxing Day, December 26<sup>th</sup>

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New Year's Day, January 1<sup>st</sup>

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Eve of Epiphany, January 5<sup>th</sup>

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## Additional Resources



### **Books:**

*Advent Conspiracy* by Rick McKinley

*Advent for Everyone* by N. T. Wright

*God is in the Manger* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Hidden Christmas* by Timothy Keller

*Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* by Bobby Gross

*Love Came Down at Christmas* by Sinclair Ferguson

*The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* by Kimberlee Conway Ireton

*The Littlest Watchman* by Scott James (children's book)

### **Others:**

*Christmas Collection, Vol.1* by Sleeping at Last (album)

*Immanuel* by Melanie Penn (album)

[Advent Pinterest Board](#)

[Christmas Pinterest Board](#)

[Observing the Christian Calendar Pinterest Board](#)