

Counting the Days *An Advent Family Session*

For this session you will need: a candle or Advent wreath, a Bible, scissors, tape, the following page needed for the Advent chain, 23 M and M's or other small pieces of candy for each family member.

Opening Prayer: Jesus, we are so anxious for Christmas! We love the lights, the food, the music, the presents, the gatherings with friends and family! Lord, we know that all these things point to the love that is at the heart of this celebration. As we count down the days until your birthday, help us to prepare by opening our hearts and spreading love to those around us, every day. Amen.

Scripture: James 5:7-10

Discussion: Have each person in the family complete these two sentence stems:

One thing I wait for everyday is ...

One thing I waited a long, long time for was ...

Each year Advent begins on the Sunday nearest to November 30 and lasts for four weeks until Christmas Eve, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. For some people (usually children) those weeks seem very, very long, and for other people (usually adults), they seem far too short! Those four weeks are symbolic of the hundreds of years the world waited for the Messiah.

Activity: Cut apart the 23 strips that will help your family count down the days until Christmas Eve. Make a circle of each strip and tape the ends together. Attach the next strip inside this circle like a chain, linking all the strips together. Hang the chain in a prominent spot where all members can see it. In the morning before leaving for work and school, tear off the bottom strip, read it aloud, and encourage all family members to follow the directions in some small way during the day. The activities may have to be adapted to individual circumstances.

Prayer: God, grant us patience as we await the birth of your Son, Jesus. Let each of these days of Advent count towards forming us to be people with loving hearts. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Look in the newspaper and find an account of someone in the world who is hurting. Pray for that person throughout your day. If you must do some hard task today, do it in that person's name.

Smile at a stranger and light up their day!

The stores are very busy this time of year. Smile at a clerk or cashier and tell them what a good job they are doing.

When you're out shoveling snow, shovel a little of the neighbor's sidewalk too.

Who is preparing your dinner today? Is there something you can do to help? If you are preparing your own dinner, can you call up someone and invite them to share it with you?

Buy or make some Christmas cookies to give away.

Make a Christmas card and send it to someone who might not receive many cards.

Clean out your toy box or toy closet and donate the things you no longer play with to charity. Adults, do this with your clothes closet.

Before you go to sleep tonight, think of someone you may have offended today. Pray for that person and ask God's forgiveness.

Write a letter, draw a picture, or send an e-mail to a friend or relative who lives far away.

If you are driving today, wait and let another car get in line ahead of you. If you are waiting at the bus stop, let someone else go ahead of you.

Who do you know that is extra good at what they do? Write them a letter thanking them for their gifts.

Look for someone who has a heavy load today. Offer to carry it for them, or offer someone a ride to do an errand.

Go off into a quiet corner and be absolutely still for ten minutes. Listen to your breath. Find God at your center.

Bring a treat to work or school today. Share it with others.

Sing a song with someone today.

Pray for your teacher, your boss, or your landlord today. Ask God to send him/her a special blessing.

If someone in your family or someone at work is sick or feeling crabby today, do some small thing to offer them comfort.

Take your Bible and read Luke 2:1-20. Imagine you are one of the shepherds tending their flocks. Think about how you would react to this wonderful event.

Make your bed or a family member's bed carefully and neatly today. Imagine that the baby Jesus will sleep there, so you want it to be just right.

Give someone a great big hug today!

When you encounter someone today that you normally try to avoid, give that person a compliment.

Who is the hardest working person you will encounter today? See if you can do one small thing to ease their load.

Preparing A Welcoming Place for Jesus

An Advent Family Session

For this session you will need: a candle or Advent wreath, a Bible, an empty crèche or a spot prepared for the placing of your nativity set, a ball of yellow or brown yarn, scissors, a small basket, your family nativity set, stick pretzels or chow mein noodles, large gum drops or other candy about the size of a quarter.

(Gather as many family members as possible to a central spot in your home such as the dining room table. Light your candle or Advent wreath as a sign that Jesus is present in your home.)

Opening Prayer: Lord, Jesus, was the place where you were born a cold, dark, and lonely place? Was your family frightened and feeling cast aside because there was no room at the inn? Or, was it a friendly place, warm with hay and the heat of the animals? Was your family grateful that someone kindly opened their stable, and did your mother and father feel secure in this place? Dear, Jesus, our family wants to welcome you this Christmas; we want you to know how much we love you, and how you are always at the center of our lives. Lord, in a special way this Advent season, we prepare a place for you in our home and in our hearts. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 2: 1-7

Discussion: Why do you think God sent his son to be born in a stable, among the animals, to a simple family, while they were away from their home? Couldn't God have had his son born in a palace to a wealthy family, and crowned as a prince immediately upon his birth? What does Jesus' lowly birth tell you about his love for humankind? What does it tell you about what is really important in our lives?

Activity: Cut the ball of yarn into short lengths (1-3") and place them in the basket. (The yarn represents fresh, soft hay.) Together arrange your family nativity set in the place you have prepared, keeping aside the baby Jesus and also the three kings. (Carefully store them in a safe place so you can bring them out at the appropriate time. Place Jesus in the crèche on December 24, and have the three kings arrive on the Epiphany, the Sunday

closest to January 6). Set the basket of yarn near the nativity set. Throughout Advent family members can place a piece of "hay" in the manger every time they do something kind for someone else. See what a soft, warm bed you can prepare for Jesus by December 24.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come. We will prepare a place for you by our kind words and actions. We will welcome you into a loving home that desires to keep you at its center. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Snack: Everyone make a little "nest" or manger out of stick pretzels or chow mein noodles. Place a large gumdrop or other candy in the center to represent the sweetness of Jesus' love for us. While sharing the snack, talk about the kind deeds each of you can do during the next few weeks to fill the crèche with soft hay.

Listening to the Story

An Advent Family Session

For this session you will need: a candle or Advent wreath, two Bibles, children's books about the birth of Jesus, apples.

(Gather as many family members as possible to a central spot in your home such as the dining room table. Light your candle or Advent wreath as a sign that Jesus is present in your home.)

Opening Prayer: What a wondrous night, O, Lord! The night you were born in a stable in Bethlehem! We listen to the story again and again and never get tired of it. O, Lord, inspire us with your story, so that this Advent, in some small way, each member of our family will draw closer to God through you. We pray with hope and love. Amen.

Scripture: The Infancy Narratives - two accounts:

Matthew 1: 18-25 and Matthew 2:1-12

Luke 2:1-20

Discussion: Only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, have stories of Jesus' birth, or what we call the infancy narratives. Notice the difference in the stories. What details or characters do you find in one that you don't find in the other? Are there details or characters you expected to find that aren't actually in the Bible (i.e. the names of the wise men, the little drummer boy, the animals that talked)? Many other stories and legends about the night Jesus was born have developed over the years. They are all part of the wonder we feel about that night as we contemplate what it must have been like.

Activity: To further familiarize yourselves with the actual Biblical accounts of Jesus' birth, play a Scripture Search game. Appoint one person as moderator, then divide the family into two teams. Each team has a Bible, and when the moderator poses a question, each team tries to find the correct answer in the Bible and to find it first. Answers have to be verified by the scripture passage. (The questions are on following page.)

Prayer: Lord, Jesus, thank you for coming to be with us on earth, to love us, and to show us how to live in love. We rejoice as we listen to the story of your birth. Help us to keep your story at the center of all parts of our celebration this Christmas. Amen.

Snack: Cut apples in half horizontally to find the star of Bethlehem! While eating your snack, read together the story of Jesus' birth from a children's storybook.

Following the Star ***An Advent Family Session***

For this session you will need: a candle or Advent wreath, a Bible, yellow construction paper, the star template, scissors, glue, glitter/sequins, yarn, star cookies, and hot chocolate.

(Gather as many family members as possible to a central spot in your home such as the dining room table. Light your candle or Advent wreath as a sign that Jesus is present in your home.)

Opening Prayer: O God, you pierce the darkness with your light! The star of Bethlehem leads us with great brightness and clarity to the manger where you were born. You are the answer to all the questions, struggles, and longing in our lives. Our family is setting out this Advent to follow the star that leads us to you. Guide us on our path! Amen.

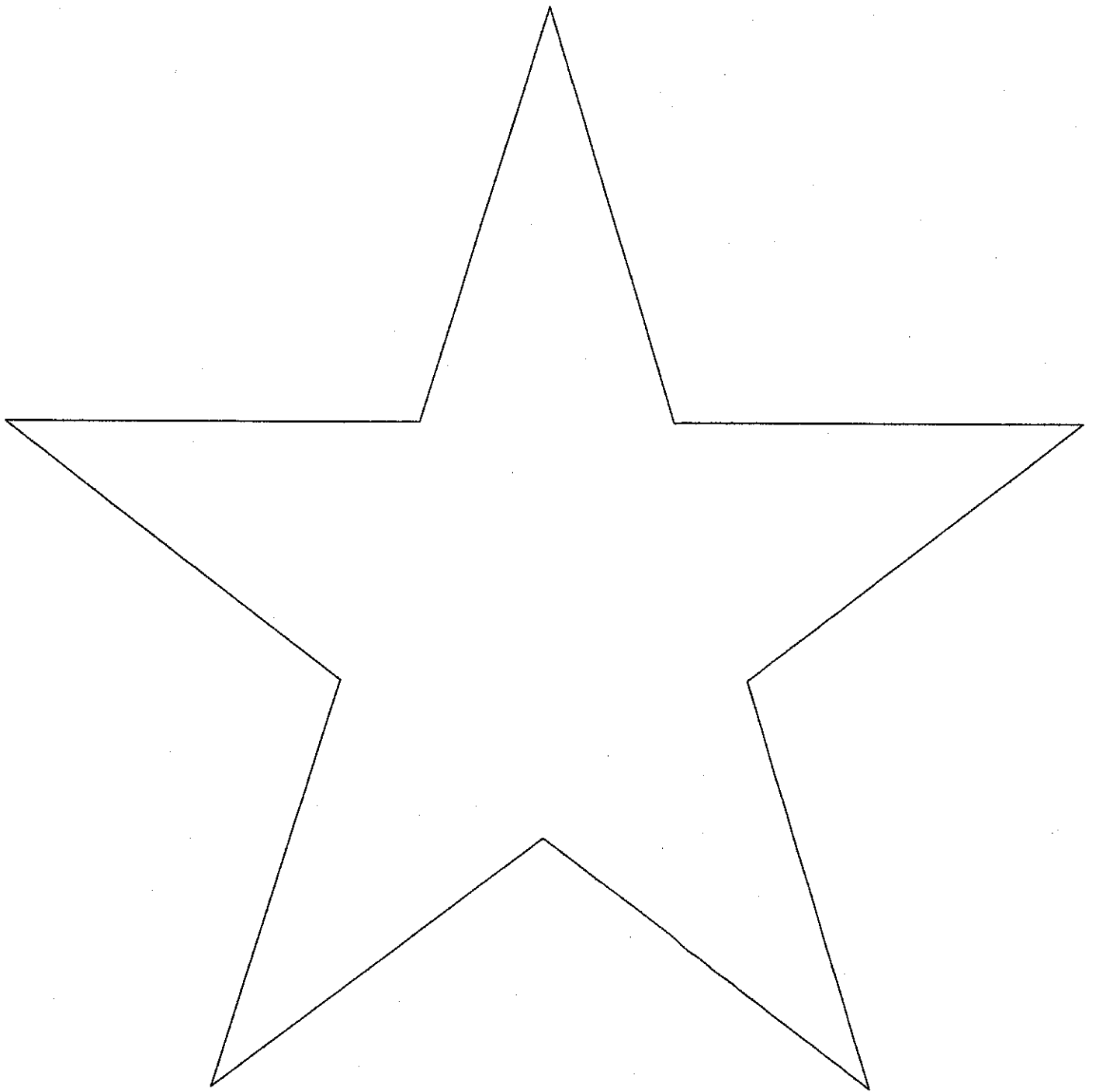
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Discussion: Talk about what it must have been like for the Magi to travel without clear directions, maps, road signs, or a GPS! Has your family ever been lost while traveling? What helped you get your bearings and find the way again? Talk about the "stars" in your life: people who guide you towards what is right and true. These might be parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches, scout leaders, etc. Are you a "star" for someone else? Does your example of Christian living light up the way to Jesus for others?

Activity: Trace and cut out large stars. Write the names of those who have been your mentors and guides on the stars. Decorate them with glitter or sequins. Use yarn to hang them in a prominent place in your house as reminders of the star that leads us to Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, the star leads us to your Son, Jesus. Thank you for the "stars" in our life: *(name them here ...)*. Help us each to shine out the light of your love and to lead others to Jesus and true peace. Amen.

Snack: Share a snack of star cookies and hot chocolate.



Preparing the Way
An Advent Family Session

For this session you will need: a candle or Advent wreath, a Bible, construction paper, markers, scissors, a snack of raisin bread and honey.

(Gather as many family members as possible to a central spot in your home such as the dining room table. Light your candle or Advent wreath as a sign that Jesus is present in your home.)

Opening Prayer: Lord, you have blessed us with this Advent time, and given us the opportunity to make straight the paths in our lives that have become crooked. Lord, make clear to us those areas in our lives that need some weeding, tending, and straightening. We ask for this help in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-3

Discussion: Are you on a clear path to God in your life? What distractions and temptations have kept you from prayer or from even thinking about God during your day? What attitudes and behaviors in your life are contrary to God's ways? Share examples of ways in which your paths have become blocked by arguments, selfishness, over scheduling, and materialistic greed fueled by the media.

Activity: Have each family member make and cut out a tracing of his/her foot on construction paper. On the foot each individual should write one "roadblock" he/she will attempt to clear from his/her path this week. (i.e. watching too much TV, using a crabby tone of voice, gossiping at work, etc.) Make a sign that says "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.*" Tape the sign and the footprints on the refrigerator for a reminder throughout the week. Check in with each other every day at mealtime to see how the "path clearing" is going.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, come! Our family is clearing a path for you into our home, into our lives, into our world! Amen.