

# LOOK! A CHILD'S GUIDE TO ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

A DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE  
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## Getting Ready for a Mystery

We often tell children that Advent is a special time for getting ready for Christmas. But what exactly are we getting ready for? And how do we do it?

As a child, I remember looking forward to the sweet mandarin oranges that came only once year wrapped in purple tissue paper, the sharp scent of the spruce boughs my dad and I used to decorate our front door, the translucent shades of the candied fruit my mom stirred into the batter of our Christmas cakes.

All the colorful and multi-sensory traditions that are part of seasonal preparations can awaken anticipation and help create a sense of sacred time. But to have their fullest meaning, they need to connect to the mystery at the heart of Christmas:

God is with us. In us. Among us.

We get ready to celebrate this deep mystery by paying attention and watching for signs of it. We look back to see how God was with us in the past, maybe in ways we did not notice at the time. We look around for signs of God at work in the world here and now. And we look ahead, imagining how we too can embody the love of God whenever and wherever we are.

This Activity Guide is divided into four sections based on the corresponding sections of Look: A Child's Guide to Advent and Christmas. There is one section for each week of Advent. You might want to choose a consistent time at the start of the week and begin by reading aloud the pages from Look! Then choose an activity or two to help you explore the theme throughout the week that follows.

## HAVE FUN LOOKING TOGETHER!

# WEEK ONE - LOOK BACK: THE PEOPLE IN DARKNESS

When the people of Israel were in exile far from home, one of the ways they kept hope alive was looking back and retelling their own sacred stories. Remembering how God had been with them in the past helped them trust that God was with them in their present suffering, and would be there whatever the future held.

As families and faith communities, we can follow this example. Telling stories about the past—both from family history and from the bible—gives children a sense of belonging to a bigger story unfolding through time. Looking back helps us remember where we have come from and what we have learned along the way.

We can also practice looking back on a smaller scale. Pausing at the end of the day (at supper time or before bed) and identifying moments when we felt close to God helps form the habit of attentiveness and awareness.

**Get Started:** Read pages 3-11 from *Look! A Child's Guide to Advent and Christmas*

## Things to Talk About:

**Look through family photos** if you have them. Give everyone a chance to tell stories or share memories connected with the pictures. Which stories are your favorite? Why do you like them?

**During Advent we light candles** as we look forward to the coming of Jesus. One of the names the bible uses for Jesus is *Light of the World*. What are some of the things light does? How does it help us? In what ways is Jesus like light?

**As we celebrate light**, it is important to remember that God is in darkness too. Why do we need the dark? How does it help us and other living things? What do you like about the dark?

## Things to Do:

**Chain of Advent Words:** On slips of purple paper write words connected with the season of Advent (e.g., wait, be still, peace, hope, joy, love, coming) or words that describes your feelings (e.g., excited, sad, worried, eager, confused, happy, content). Make them into a chain and hang it your home as a reminder that there is room in this season for all our feelings.

**Stargazing:** If you live in a place where it is dark enough to see the stars, bundle up and go outside to sit and enjoy them. Alternatively, cuddle up in a comfortable place indoors, put on some gentle music, turn out all the lights, sit together and enjoy the darkness.

**Jesse Tree:** Make your own Jesse tree to help you tell stories about the family of Jesus. You can choose symbols and color them and glue them to the lids of frozen juice cans. Older children (7+) might enjoy *Read, Wonder, Listen: Stories from the Bible for Young Readers* by Laura Alary (Wood Lake Books, 2018)

**Advent Journal:** Make your own Advent journal by folding four or five sheets of letter paper in half. Add a folded piece of cardstock as a cover. Punch two holes near the fold and thread yarn or ribbon through the holes to bind the book together. At the end of every day ask yourself: *Where did I see God today?* Write about it or draw a picture in your journal.

**Examen Jar:** You will need a glass jar or bowl and marbles or glass pebbles in two contrasting colors. Let

one color represent good moments, the other, hard moments. At the end of each day (at supper or bedtime) give everyone a chance to place a marble of each color in the jar and talk about a good moment and a hard moment that day. Wonder together about how God was present in both.

## Things to Read:

*All Creation Waits* (picture book edition) by Gayle L. Boss (Paraclete Press, 2023) This stunning picture book walks young readers through Advent by introducing them each day to an animal for whom winter is a time of rest, waiting, and transformation.

*God's Holy Darkness* by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick, illustrated by Nikki Faison (Beaming Books, 2022) An exploration of the theme of darkness, blackness, and night in the bible as good and holy--places where God is present and active and creative.

*The Examen Book: Exploring Every Day With God* by Paul Mitchell and Katie Broussard (Loyola Press, 2022) A child-friendly introduction to the Ignatian tradition of the daily examen.



## WEEK TWO - LOOK AROUND: JOHN THE BAPTIST

Grownups often ask children what they want to be when they grow up. When my daughter was in elementary school she had a teacher who asked a different question: What problems do you see that you would like to help solve?

I liked this variation because it got the students thinking about purpose—meaningful things they would like to do to make the world a better place.

Sometimes when we see problems we wish someone else would show up and fix them. But John the Baptist helps us remember that we can't just sit back and wait for someone else to rescue us. We need to look around, pay attention, notice problems, try to understand what causes them, and think about solutions. We do this work together, as part of making way for God's peace and justice to come into the world.

**Get Started:** Read pages 12-21 from *Look! A Child's Guide to Advent and Christmas*

### Things to Talk About:

**What problems do you see around you?** At home? At school? In your community? In the world? What are some of the causes of these problems?

**Has anyone ever helped you solve a problem?** How did they help?

**John the Baptist** got angry at the unfairness in the world. How can anger be helpful? How can it be harmful? What makes you angry?

### Things to Do:

**Homemade Cards:** Loneliness is a problem for many people. Receiving a handwritten notecard in the mailbox can make someone feel connected and less alone. Making your own cards is fun! Here are some ideas to try:

1. Cut shapes out of sponges and dip them in tempera paint, then press them onto card stock to make designs.
2. Try block printing. Trim away the edges of a foam tray (the kind sometimes used to vegetables in the grocery store) and use a knitting needle or crochet hook to press a design into it. Coat the surface of the tray with paint and then press it onto paper or cardstock.
3. Cut a potato in half, push a small metal cookie cutter into the cut surface, then get a grownup to help you trim away the potato around the outside. Now you have a potato stamp you can dip in paint and use to stamp cardstock.
4. Use the stamps to make your own wrapping paper. Stamp your patterns onto brown butcher paper and use it to wrap presents.

**Write for Rights:** Speak up for human rights around the world by joining the Amnesty International Write for Rights campaign. Grownups can choose age-appropriate cases from the Amnesty International website and tell the stories. People of all ages can write letters to government officials, or send cards of hope to those wrongfully imprisoned.

**Family Favorite Ginger Cookies:** In *Look!* the narrator bakes cookies as gifts for her neighbors. You can do this too. Here is my family recipe:

3 ¼ cups all purpose flour  
½ tsp baking soda  
¼ tsp salt  
1 tsp ground cinnamon  
2 tsp ground ginger  
¼ tsp ground cloves  
1 cup salted butter, softened  
¾ dark brown sugar, firmly packed  
1 large egg  
½ cup molasses

Preheat the oven to 325F. Whisk together the flour, baking soda, salt, and spices in a bowl. In a separate bowl, cream the butter and sugar. Add egg and molasses and beat well until the mixture is smooth. Gradually add the flour mixture, beating after each addition.

Separate the dough into two balls and flatten them into disks. Wrap each disk in plastic or beeswax wrap and refrigerate for one hour or until firm.

On a floured surface, roll dough out to ¼ inch thickness. Cut into shapes and place on an ungreased baking sheet, leaving ½ inch between them. Bake from 9 to 11 minutes. Cool on a rack and decorate with icing (or leave them plain).

## Things to Read:

*Cocoa Magic* by Sandra Bradley, illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard (Pajama Press, 2022) This a sweet story about how a classroom and school are transformed through small gifts of empathy and attention—and chocolate!



## WEEK THREE: LOOK AHEAD

Once, when I was telling the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, a child in the circle remarked, “I wonder if Mary could have said no?” What a good question!

When we tell the story we usually acknowledge that Mary must have been scared or surprised, then move quickly to her trusting yes. But what about the space in between? What questions and thoughts and feelings must have filled her mind in those seconds—or minutes—between Gabriel’s announcement and her acceptance of it?

We can only wonder. But wondering can help us see Mary in a new way; not simply as humble and meek, but as imaginative and brave. Looking ahead is about being open, like Mary, to wonderful new possibilities—even ones we have not yet dreamed of.

**Get Started:** Read pages 22-25 from *Look! A Child’s Guide to Advent and Christmas*

### Things to Talk About:

**Do you think Mary** could have said *no* to God? Why or why not?

**Have you ever** said *no* to something important because you were afraid? What were you afraid of? What might have happened if you had said yes?

**Have you ever** said yes to trying something new even though you were scared? What happened?

**In *Look!*** the narrator wants to paint a picture of Mary wearing pink because pink feels joyful and fresh—the color of new things. If you painted a picture of Mary, what color would you choose for her? Why? What color feels most joyful to you?

**Look at this portrait** of Mary by Lauren Wright Pittman. She is wearing pink. What else do you notice about the picture? <http://www.lewpstudio.com/devotionalart/contoursofmarysdream>

**For a long time** Christian artists painted Mary with pale skin and light hair and eyes, even though, as a woman from the middle east, she likely had brown or olive skin and dark hair and eyes. More and more artists are now depicting Mary in new ways, so people from many places can see themselves in her. Why do you think it matters that we have many different images of Mary?

**When you look at art** in churches or bible story books, do you see people who look like you? How does that feel? If you were going to make a picture of the birth of Jesus, what would the characters look like?

### Did you know?

Long ago artists used to make their own paints. Depending on what they were made from, some colors were much rarer than others. The rarest of all (and most expensive) was *ultramarine blue*. It was made by grinding a stone called *lapis lazuli* into a powder and mixing it with other ingredients.

*Lapis Lazuli* was mined in northern Afghanistan and brought to Europe by Italian traders at great cost. The vivid blue made from it was considered more precious than gold, so was only used for the most special purposes: painting the robes of Jesus and his mother Mary. That is where the tradition of Mary wearing blue came from! [Colour: *Travels Through the Paintbox* by Victoria Finlay, London: The Folio Society, 2009, originally published by Hodder & Stoughton, 2002]



## Things to Do:

**Portraits of Mary:** Make your own portrait of Mary the way you imagine her. Dress her in any color you want!

**Drawing God:** Read the book *Drawing God* by Karen Kiefer (Paraclete Press), or *Picturing God* by Ruth Goring (Beaming Books). Pick a favorite name for God and make your own collage out paper or fabric. Or draw how you imagine God.

**Candle of Joy:** Tear or cut colored tissue paper into small pieces. Paint part of the surface of a small glass jar with glue, then cover it with overlapping bits of tissue paper. Work your way around the jar until it is covered. Add a layer of glue on top, let it dry, put a tea light inside, and enjoy your candle of joy!

## Things to Read:

*That Baby in the Manger* by Anne E. Neuberger, illustrated by Chloe Pitkoff (Paraclete Press, 2017) A lovely story that expresses how important it is for all children to see themselves reflected in the Christ child.

*Mother God* by Teresa Kim Pecinovsky, illustrated by Khoa Lee (Beaming Books, 2022) A beautiful celebration of biblical references to God as mother.

*Dear Mama God* by Daneen Akers, illustrated by Gillian Gamble (Watchfire Media, 2023) A charming collection of prayers of thanksgiving (originally prayed by the author's young daughter) addressed to "Dear Mama God".



## WEEK FOUR: CHRISTMAS

The final week of Advent brings us closer and closer to the Mystery of Christmas.

This is a good time to tell the familiar story in some unfamiliar ways. Seek out versions of the nativity story from different cultures or perspectives. Look at the story from different angles, focusing on different characters. Retell it in your own words and invite children to do the same.

Most of all, wonder together about where we are in this story.

**Get Started:** Read pages 26-32 from *Look! A Child's Guide to Advent and Christmas*

### Things to Talk About:

**For people in the northern hemisphere,** December 21<sup>st</sup> (the winter solstice) is the longest night of the year. Some churches have special services on this night for those who feel sad or lonely at Christmas time. People gather in the darkness to lament (express their sadness in words or songs) and light candles as signs of hope. Do you ever feel sad around Christmas time? Do you ever feel you have to pretend to be happy?

**Read the story** of the birth of Jesus from the bible (Luke 1:26-38; 39-56; 2:1-20; Matthew 1:18-25; 2:1-15). As you listen, imagine how different characters might be feeling. Scared? Sad? Worried? Angry? Joyful? Hopeful?

**What are your favorite parts** of the story of the birth of Jesus? Are there parts that you don't like or don't understand? Are there parts of the story that feel like they are about you?

**In *Look!*** we read, "Whenever we say yes to God, the light of Christ shines through us in a new place and time." When and where does the light of Christ shine through you?

### Things to Do:

**Longest Night Gathering:** If your family is feeling sadness or grief around Christmas, you can observe the Longest Night at home. One way is to light a candle, name your feelings, and pray a simple prayer (for excellent examples see: *Faithful Families for Advent and Christmas* by Traci Smith, Chalice Press, 2020, pp. 72-75).

**Color Your Feelings:** You can also use art to express your feelings. For inspiration, read *My Favorite Color is Blue. Sometimes.* by Roger Hutchison (Paraclete Press). Which color (or colors) best describes how you are feeling? Make a painting using those colors.

**Luminaries:** A luminary is an object that gives off light. There are many ways to make them. The simplest is to cut shapes out of the sides of a brown paper bag (lunch bag size), fold the top edge of the bag down an inch or so, pour in some sand or kitty litter, then place an electric tea light (safer than a real candle) in the bag. Reusable luminaries can be made out of clean metal juice cans. With the help of a grownup, punch holes in the sides of the can using an awl, then spray paint the cans with flat black paint. Let them dry then place a tea light in the bottom. If you live in a place that is cold enough you can even



make frozen luminaries. Stretch the opening of a round balloon around a faucet and fill the balloon with water. Carefully remove it and tie the end to make a water balloon. After you have made as many as you want, set the balloons on a cookie sheet and put them outdoors to freeze. Once they are frozen, peel off the balloons and set the frozen spheres in the snow over top of battery powered tea lights. Use your luminaries to line your sidewalk or steps or balcony.

**Nativity Rocks:** Using pebbles or small river rocks, make pictures that tell the story of the birth of Jesus. Without the gluing the stones down, use them to make each scene, then take it apart and make another, telling the story as you go. For inspiration read *A Savior is Born: Rocks Tell the Story of Christmas* by Patti Rokus (Zondervan).

**Make Your Own Nativity:** Paint faces and bodies on river rocks using acrylic paint, then spray them with a sealant. Or cut simple figures out of felt and glue them to small blocks of wood. These homemade nativities are sturdy and easy to handle so even very young children can tell and retell the story.

**Kindness Rocks:** If you enjoy painting stones, you can also bring a bit of light to the world by joining in the Kindness Project. This is a world-wide activity that involves painting positive messages on rocks and placing them where people will find them. You can find out more at <https://www.thekindnessrocksproject.com>

**Nature Walk:** As a family or group, go for a walk outdoors. Try to pay special attention to little things, like the colors and smells of winter, the sounds of birds or dry leaves and seed pods. Say a prayer of thanks for the gifts of creation.

## Things to Read:

*The Huron Carol* by Ian Wallace (Groundwood Books)

*Ituku's Christmas Journey* by Elena Pasquali and Dubravka Kolanovic (Good Books)

*A Child is Born* by Margaret Wise Brown and Floyd Cooper (Hyperion Books, 2000)

*What a Morning! The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals* by John Langstaff and Ashley Bryan (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1987)

*Who Built the Stable? A Nativity Poem* by Ashley Bryan (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2012)

## For your nature walk:

*Winter Sleep: A Hibernation Story* by Sean Taylor and Alex Morss and Cinyi Chiu (words & pictures)

*Ten Ways to Hear Snow* by Cathy Camper and Kenard Pak (Kokila)

*Hiders Seekers, Finders Keepers: How Animals Adapt in Winter* by Jessica Kulekjian and Salini Perera (Kids Can Press)

*Over and Under the Snow* by Kate Messner and Christopher Silas Neal (Chronicle Books)

