Opinion



One of Verna Bechard's 193 nativity sets. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)



by Mike Jordan Laskey

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Advent is a criminally underrated liturgical season. It gets swallowed up in the pre-Christmas rush, and it's shorter and less intense than Lent, but it's a beautiful, quiet period worth marking. Beyond the obvious "get to Mass on all the Advent Sundays and every Sunday" exhortation, here are 10 simple tips for your Advent observation, from one busy person to another.

1. Read some sort of short, daily devotion.

Just a few pages a day, max. There are plenty of great options to consider, including the *Little Blue Book*, *Daybreaks* from Liguori Press, and Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann's new devotional *Celebrating Abundance*. My wife and I decided last-minute to host three discussion sessions on Brueggemann's book at our house this Advent. Due to the procrastination, we gave some friends just 24 hours to respond if they were interested. Much to our surprise, we got about 10 takers. The lesson: People are hungry for some sort of spiritual nourishment, especially around this time of year. I bet you could find a person or two to reflect on some readings with you during the season by the first Sunday of Advent.

2. Get some quiet time.

Advent the liturgical season is quiet and dark, as we await the in-breaking of Christ's light at Christmas. Advent the shopping and party season is loud and glaringly bright. Seek out some quiet time separate from bedtime. Maybe try repeating the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" to yourself, slowly as you breathe in and out with your eyes closed. You can do this in your office or kitchen. And in this spirit …

3. It's OK to say no.

You don't have to go to every party you're invited to or schlep to the mall the Saturday before Christmas or watch the endless loop of wintry car commercials. As a mentor of mine likes to say, " 'No' is a complete sentence." Of course, there are certain obligations this time of year — especially for parents of young kids, I'm learning — that you just can't say "no" to. So I need to practice discerning which activities are essential and which can be skipped.

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4. Don't forget the Advent music.

I'm not here to play liturgical police and tell you to shelve the Christmas music until sunset on Dec. 24. However, there are plenty of great Advent hymns and songs to work into your rotation. Some of my favorites: Sufjan Stevens' version of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel;" Steve Angrisano's modern update of that same classic; composer JJ Wright's brilliant jazz/classical album "O Emmanuel;" the French hymn, "O Come Divine Messiah;" and Dan Schutte's "Christ Circle Round Us."

5. Decorate, even a little.

We Catholics are sacramental people: Smells, bells, stained glass, beautiful music, bread and wine. God can visit through our sensory experiences. So put out a nativity set (or, if you work for the church like my wife and I do and people like giving you religious gifts, put out eight or 10 nativity sets). Get some greenery or fake greenery up somewhere. And, at the very least ...

6. Light an Advent wreath.

If you don't have one of these, a lot of parishes sell them. Try this short prayer from the U.S. bishops when you light it each Sunday. The family and home are what the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* calls the "domestic church," and an Advent wreath tradition is simple, lovely way to strengthen that smallest, essential community of faith.

7. Got a young kid or two? Add a Christmas book to bedtime reading list.

Speaking of the domestic church: If you have kids you read to at night, add a nativity book for children to your stack. We have already started reading some Christmas stories to our 2-year-old, and it's amazing how she is beginning to recognize the characters of the story so fast. I'm reminded how vivid and awe-inspiring the nativity story is.

8. Support an organization that works for social justice.

"Giving Tuesday" has come and gone, but the Advent and Christmas seasons are better inspirations for supporting charitable organizations anyway. As the magi brought whatever they had to give the newborn king, our own gifts to organizations that further the building of the kingdom of God on Earth is one way to celebrate their legacy. In addition to incredible, independent agencies all over the country, your

own local Catholic Charities agency or Catholic Relief Services (international assistance) are reliably great nonprofits.

9. Consider the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Someone I know who's familiar with Catholic internet searches tells me "act of contrition" is one of the most popular Catholic Google search terms every Advent and Lent. This isn't all that surprising, as a lot of parishes host Sacrament of Reconciliation services during both seasons. I know my mom always wanted us to make it to the sacrament during Advent and Lent growing up. If Advent is all about preparing, there's no better way to prepare your heart and spirit. (I always freeze up when it comes time for the act of contrition, so I like to bring a paper copy or a copy on my phone with me into the confessional.)

10. Reflect on the "three comings of the Lord."

St. Bernard of Clairvaux described these three comings as the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the coming of Jesus into our lives in the present time, and Christ's final coming in glory on the last day. In Advent, we wait and prepare for all three. Most Advents, I spend about 95 percent of my prayer and reflection and energy focused on the first coming only — with the manger, the shepherds, the angels, the baby. I'm missing those second and third arrivals of Jesus. I hope I'll stick to at least some of these suggestions I've outlined here, and that they'll help me focus on the Advent story that goes beyond Bethlehem.

Before you write these ideas down on a checklist, one disclaimer: I think all 10 of these practices are good ideas, but this list not full of silver bullets that will make this Advent "the best Advent ever" for you. Faith and joy and peace are unearned gifts only God can give. Through spiritual discipline, we can only put ourselves in a posture of humility and gratitude before the Lord, invite the Spirit into our lives, and be ready to respond.

[Mike Jordan Laskey is the director of Life & Justice Ministries for the diocese of Camden, New Jersey. He blogs for the Camden diocese at camdenlifejustice.wordpress.com.]

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