

Using Advent and Christmas Symbols in Sunday School



From a webinar presented by Debbie Kolacki of
PRC – Practical Resources for Churches

Why use Advent and Christmas symbols in Sunday school?



- Teaching children about Advent and its message of waiting and preparation is an important one. (The word Advent means “coming.”) We live in a world where there is instant gratification for many things, but sometimes in life we need to wait and learn to be patient. Many of the symbols of Advent, such as an Advent calendar, help children to see that there is a progression toward Christmas.
- Participating in the rituals and traditions of Advent and Christmas connects us to other Christians in the world today, as well as with the faithful who came before us and those who will come after us. Learning about the symbols of the season makes children realize they are part of the greater church.
- The secular world focuses on materialism during the Christmas season and not the real meaning of Christmas. However, many of the seemingly secular parts of the season, such as Christmas trees, poinsettias, and even Santa Claus, have a deeper meaning connected to the birth of Jesus. When children learn about these meanings, they can focus on their Savior as they get involved in the preparations for Christmas.

Advent symbols

Advent calendars

Advent calendars can be a fun way for children to count down the days until Christmas. They can be made of a variety of materials and often have a door which can be opened for each day of Advent. There might be a little treat behind the door, such as a chocolate, but you can also have a symbol of Advent behind each door or a suggested activity.

The Sunday School Crafts website has a simple [Baby Jesus Advent Calendar](#) for little ones where a circle for each day is colored in.

You can use [25 Random Acts of Kindness: A Christmas Countdown](#) to create an Advent calendar by filling in an act of kindness for each day in a December using a calendar template. You can also cut the acts of kindness into strips and put them in a jar or basket; the children pick one for each day of Advent.

The Activities for Kids website has downloadable pages to make an [Advent calendar paper chain](#) that tells the Christmas story with verses from the Bible.

Advent wreath and candles

One of the most well-known symbols of Advent is the Advent wreath. Many churches have one in the sanctuary and have a short litany each Sunday as the candles are lit. Often, members of the congregation or entire families are asked to read the prayers and light the candles.

The wreath is usually made of evergreen branches in a circular shape, which symbolizes eternal life and God's everlasting love. There are at least four candles for each of the four Sundays in Advent. Usually, three of four of the candles are purple, the color of royalty. In ancient times, purple dyes were rare and costly so they were only worn by kings or the very wealthy. The candles can symbolize different things but the most common meaning is that they stand for hope, peace, joy, and love.



The third candle is often rose or pink as the Third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday. Often there is a fifth candle, called the Christ candle, inside the Advent wreath which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. This candle is white and represents Jesus, the light of the world coming to banish the darkness.

If your church doesn't have an Advent wreath or if the children aren't in worship to see it lit each week, you can have a candle lighting service in your classroom. Making Advent wreaths for the children to bring home, along with instructions and a simple litany, is a wonderful way to help families celebrate their faith at home. Or you might want to host an intergenerational event after Sunday worship and let each family make their own Advent wreath together.

There are many websites with instructions on making Advent wreaths, including the [Feels Like Home blog](#) and the [Building Faith website](#).

Wreaths can be made with fresh greens or artificial ones. You can find wreath bases, some already with candle holders, in craft stores or online. [Autom](#) sells a variety of wreath bases and candles, including flameless Advent votive candles.

Church year and colors of Advent

The church year begins on the first Sunday in Advent and it's a good time to teach children about the church year and the colors that go with it. The Reformed Worship website has an article about [teaching children about the church year](#) in worship, Christian Education classes, and at home.

The Sunday School Kids website has instructions and a downloadable pattern for making a [church year wheel](#).

You can also find [information and activities about the church year](#) on Pinterest. Be aware that there are some slight differences in the church year between Protestants and Catholics or between different denominations.

If your children go into the sanctuary for worship, have them note the color of the paraments, which are the cloths that adorn the altar, pulpit, etc. Your clergy person may also wear vestments which follow the colors of the church year. If your children don't go into the sanctuary, you can set up a sacred space or altar in your classroom and cover it with a cloth that correlates with the color of the current church season. Traditionally, the color for Advent has been purple which represents royalty and penitence or waiting. In Advent, Christians are waiting not only for the birth of the baby Jesus but also for the Second Coming of Christ.

Many churches now use blue as the color for Advent, which represents hope. On Christmas Eve, white is the color of choice, which symbolizes purity and joy.

There is a [chart](#) available online which lists the colors for the church seasons according to the different denominations.



Hanging of the greens

Some churches have a hanging of the greens service at the beginning of Advent where the church is decorated with greenery as the meaning of the greens is explained and incorporated into the service. For example, cedar represents royalty and fir and pine stand for everlasting life.

A Christmas wreath made of holly leaves can symbolize Jesus' crown of thorns. Its circular shape stands for eternity and everlasting life. Holly represents Christ's death and ivy the resurrection, so they are often used together to remind us of the promise of life due to the birth of Jesus.

Denominational books of worship may offer a hanging of the greens service and there are many available online, such as [this one](#) from the United Methodist Church's Discipleship Ministries website.

The service can be the regular Sunday morning one or can be scheduled after it, perhaps with a covered dish luncheon preceding it. This type of service is a good one to try if you're looking to do more intergenerational ministry.

If your church doesn't have a hanging of the greens service, perhaps you can suggest they try one. You can also have your own service as you decorate your classroom.



Jesse tree

The Jesse tree is named for the father of King David, an ancestor of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. In Isaiah 11:1, we read what is considered by some a prophecy of Jesus' birth: "A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots."

The earliest Jesse trees were carvings, tapestries, or stained glass windows with decorations that represented stories in the Bible from creation to Jesus' birth. Modern Jesse trees can be an actual Christmas tree or a large branch or a tree made of fabric or paper. Jesse trees can be used as an Advent calendar, with a different ornament being added to the tree each day in Advent.

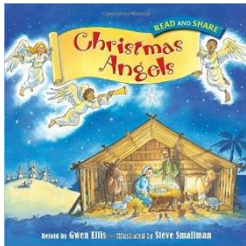
There are many different symbols used to decorate a Jesse tree. For example, an ark and rainbow represent the story of Noah and a crown stands for King David.

The website of the Reformed Church in America has [instructions on making a Jesse tree](#) along with patterns for ornaments. It also has Jesse tree devotions, family devotions to use with the Jesse tree, an intergenerational event based on the Jesse tree, and a list of additional Jesse tree resources.

On the Building Faith website, you'll find [an article](#) written about a church which had their children learn about a different Old Testament story for several weeks and made a Jesse tree ornament for each story. They then had the child put on an Advent skit based on the Jesse tree. The script is available to download free from the website.

Christmas symbols

Angels



A book called [Christmas Angels: Read and Share](#) written by Gwen Ellis is for younger children and focuses on the angels who were involved in the Christmas story and served as messengers of God's good news. There's also a pop-up nativity manger scene in the center of the book. The book is no longer available from the publisher but inexpensive copies are available on Amazon from third party sellers.

The DLTK-Bible website offers a [lesson on Angels in the Bible](#) for younger children. It includes some angel crafts.

For older children, you could read the stories of the angels involved in the Christmas story and then talk about them. In popular culture, angels are often depicted as cute little children but is that how they appear in the Bible? The [whyangels.com website](#) has information about angels from the Bible.

You'll find a [lesson about angels for youth](#) on the Youth Source website.

There are plenty of directions online for making angel crafts for kids. You can check out [“21 Angel Crafts Kids Can Make at Christmas”](#) on the Mommy’s Bundle website.

You can also search for [“Christmas angel crafts”](#) on Pinterest and you’ll find simple ideas for very young children as well as more elaborate angel crafts.

There are also Christmas pageants that emphasize the role of angels in the Christmas story, including one on the dramatix website called [“God’s Angels.”](#)

You could focus on angels for the whole of Advent and participate in Prison Fellowship’s [Angel Tree program](#) which provides Christmas gifts the children from their incarcerated parents. You can also have your own angel tree ministry by having a Christmas tree hung with paper angels. Each angel lists a gift for a child from a needy family; people select an angel, take it off the tree, and then purchase the item for the child.

Christmas carols about angels include “Angels We Have Heard on High,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” and “Angels, from the Realms of Glory.”

Bells

Bells have been used for centuries to celebrate the birth of Christ. In some churches, it is the tradition that the largest bell in the church is rung four times in the hour before midnight on Christmas Eve and then at midnight all the bells are rung. In the early church there was a belief that Jesus was born at midnight, although there is no proof for this.

When people in Victorian times went caroling, they often carried small handbells to play along with the carols. There are many Christmas songs which focus on carols. “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” started as a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was during the Civil War and Longfellow wrote of hearing the bells on Christmas Day and the words “Peace on earth, good will to men.” In despair, he says there is no peace on earth because “hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.” Yet, at the end of the song as the bells ring more loudly, he realizes that “God is not dead” and that the right will prevail “with peace on earth, good will to men.”

Secular songs about bells include the well-known “Jingle Bells” and “Silver Bells.”

You might want to encourage your children to make a joyful noise by giving them bells to ring as they sing Christmas carols. The Sermons4Kids website has a [children’s sermon](#) (which could also be used in the classroom) which focuses on Christmas bells and the true meaning of Christmas. Children are each given a jingle bell necklace and

told that the tiny ball inside the bell makes the ringing sound as it hits the inside of the bell and our joy comes from the inside too; it comes from having love for Jesus in our hearts. The children then hold the bell in their hand and shake it but it doesn't make the same lovely sound as before. We shouldn't do anything to dampen our joy at Christmas. "If the gifts and parties become the most important thing, then we will no longer ring out the true meaning of Christmas!"

How about making some sugar cookies for the children using a bell-shaped cookie cutter so they can enjoy a treat as you talk about the symbolism of bells at Christmas time? You can also make cookies in the shape of many other Christmas symbols. The Betty Crocker website has [recipes for many different Christmas cookies](#) including some in the shape of candy canes, angels, and Christmas wreaths.

Candy canes

Another sweet treat we enjoy at Christmas time is the candy cane.

A legend has developed around the candy cane which gives it a Christian meaning. You can read about it in the book called [The Legend of the Candy Cane](#).



There are also websites with information about the candy cane. Spangler, a manufacturer of candy canes, has [information](#) on its website about candy cane history and legends. The candy cane was invented in 1670 by a choirmaster in Germany who gave his young singers sugar sticks to keep them quiet during a Christmas service. The candies were bent to resemble shepherds' crooks to remind the children of the shepherds who shared the good news of Christ's birth.

It is also said that an Indiana candy maker made the candy cane to remind people of Jesus. The white color symbolized Jesus' sinless nature and the red stripes symbolized the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. The candy is in the form of a J which stands for Jesus.

The Ministry-to-Children website offers a free [printable of a poem](#) based on the symbolism of the candy cane which you can attach to candy canes to give out to the children (and adults) in your church.

Chrismons

Chrismons, which are ornaments which represent Christian symbols, are a relatively new tradition. They were created in 1957 by Frances Kipps Spencer, a church member of Ascension Lutheran Church in Danville, Virginia. They are usually only made in

white and gold; white is the liturgical color for Christmas to symbolize the purity of Jesus and gold represents the majesty and glory of Jesus. Spencer also came up with the name Chrismons, a combination of Christ and monogram. [Ascension Lutheran's website](#) has information about Chrismons and still sells the original designs for them, along with other Chrismons-related resources.

The [whyChristmas.com](#) website has information about Chrismons as well as patterns you can use to make them.

Chrismons can be made from almost anything including paper; embroidery and needlepoint Chrismons are also popular. You can also make them out of [Styrofoam or foam board](#).

The Sunday School Kids website has [patterns and instructions](#) for making Chrismons with children. There are options for simple ones and more elaborate ones. The [downloadable patterns](#) are available in small and large sizes so you can select the size based on the age of your children. There are also instructions for making a [Chrismons wreath](#).

Some churches have a [special service](#) when they hang their Chrismons on the Christmas tree.

The Chrismons tree can also be decorated as part of the [hanging of the greens service](#).

Christmas trees and gifts

The Christmas tree is often thought of as a purely secular part of Christmas, but it has its roots in Christianity. In Germany in the 16th century, Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. It is thought that Martin Luther was the first to add lighted candles to the tree, after see the stars shining through evergreens trees during a walk on a winter evening.

It took a longer time for Christmas trees to be accepted in America, as they were seen by some as pagan symbols. The Puritans in America were against any celebration of Christmas other than a church service. In the 19th century, with many German and Irish immigrants arriving in America, Christmas trees and other Christmas practices became more acceptable.

The Christmas tree, as an evergreen, of courses symbolizes eternal life. Many of the items used also have symbolic meanings, such as the star at the top of the tree which reminds us of the one which guided the wise men to Bethlehem. Angels also play a part in the Christmas story and some Christmas trees are decorated with angels, including an angel instead of a star at the top.

Having a Christmas tree in your classroom gives you the opportunity to decorate it with ornaments that are meaningful and spend some time explaining their symbolism to your children.

Talking about Christmas gifts to your children gives you the opportunity to emphasize the giving of gifts, rather than receiving them. The wise men came to Jesus with gifts and we should also give to Jesus by giving to others. The weeks before Christmas are a wonderful time for a service or mission project in Sunday school. If you collect items for children or adults in need, these can be wrapped and placed under the Christmas tree in your classroom. Sermons4Kids has a [children's message](#) which emphasizes giving to others at Christmas time.

Holly and poinsettias

We've already discussed the meaning of holly, and how it reminds us of Christ's crown of thorns. The prickly leaves represent the thorns and the red berries drops of blood. There are a few legends about the holly plant. One is that the berries were originally white but that the blood Jesus shed for us stained the berries red. Another legends is that holly sprang up from Jesus' footsteps. The song "The Holly and the Ivy" uses the symbolism of the holly as its theme.



There are plenty of [holly crafts for kids on Pinterest](#), as well as recipes for easy to make holly cookies using corn flakes and other ingredients.

Another plant we see during Christmas time is the poinsettia. The poinsettia plant comes from Central America and was made popular in the US in the 1830s. It blooms in the wintertime. There is a Mexican legend about the poinsettia. It is said that a poor girl named Pepita (or Lucida or Maria) was sad because she didn't have a gift to give to the baby Jesus at the Christmas Eve service. She picked some weeds and made them into a bouquet. Her cousin told her that even the smallest gift makes Jesus happy if it's given to him by someone who loves him. As Pepita put her bouquet near the nativity scene, the weeds miraculously turned into bright red flowers.

The story is retold by Tomie dePaolo in the beautifully illustrated book [The Legend of the Poinsettia](#). The author reads the book and the illustrations are shown in a [YouTube video](#) which runs for about 12 minutes. The Ministry-to-Children website also has a [lesson based on the book and the legend](#).

It is also said that the shape of the poinsettia flower and leaves symbolize the Star of Bethlehem and the red leaves symbolize Christ's blood.

Nativity sets

The symbolism of a nativity set is obvious. If you have one in your classroom, you can add figures to it as you tell the story of Jesus' birth. You can also have the three wise men appearing in different part of the room each week, as they get closer to the manger and then finally arrive on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany.

If you have an unbreakable nativity set, then you can let the children play with the figures themselves. These are available on Amazon, such as the [Bible Toys Nativity Playset](#) or the [Fisher Price Little People Nativity Set](#).

You might also want to give each child a [small nativity set](#) as a gift or a [nativity ornament](#).

You can also have children make their own nativity scene, such as this [paper bag nativity](#). Amy's Free Ideas website has a number of ideas for [nativity scenes](#) using different materials such as toilet paper tubes and golf tees. You can also make [nativity figures using clothespins](#).

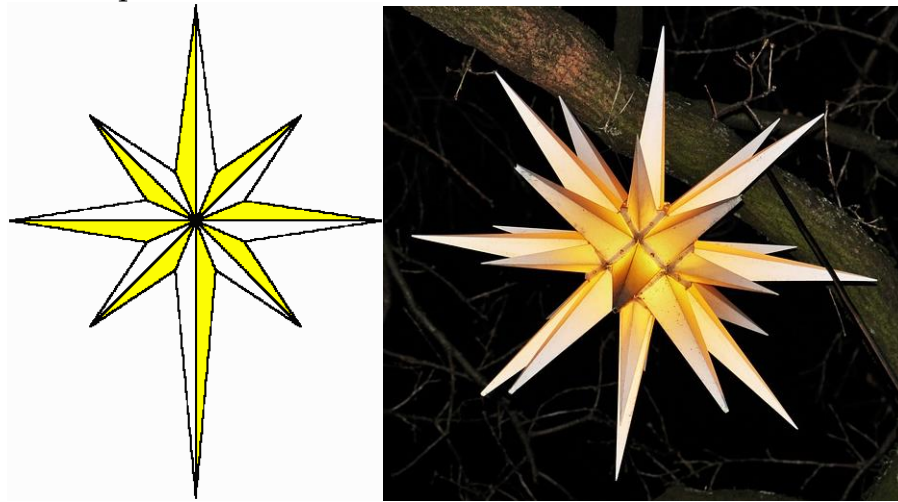


Stars

No one knows exactly what the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem looked like. There is speculation that it could have been an actual star, a comet, a supernova, an alignment of planets, or something supernatural. Planetariums often have shows around Christmas time that speculate on what the star of Bethlehem might have been. Older children might be interested in this topic. The BBC website has information about the [different theories of the Star of Bethlehem](#).

A star also symbolizes Christ, the light of the world.

There are many different types of stars. If you go to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, around Christmas time, you'll see a Bethlehem star shining from a nearby mountain. A Bethlehem star is depicted below on the left and a Moravian star is shown on the right.



The [Moravians](#) founded the town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1741 and many of them still live there today.

In the well-known carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," we hear the refrain:

Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy Perfect Light.

A modern hymn called "[Starchild](#)" is socially relevant and focuses on those who are rejected by our society.

The Flame: Creative Children's Ministry website has a number of [Advent/Christmas activities](#) including a loom band nativity star, prayer stars, star decorations, and a nativity star coloring sheet.

What about Santa Claus?

Santa Claus is an important Christmas figure for children, but many of them don't know about his origins in St. Nicholas. The [Saint Nicholas Center website](#) has lots of information about the precursor to Santa along with activities, crafts, handouts, scripts, recipes, a section for teachers, and a section for children.

The website lists reasons to celebrate St. Nicholas Day on December 6 including "to learn about the true Santa Claus...St. Nicholas, a man of faith who lived his life in

devotion to Christ,” and “to focus on giving more than receiving: St. Nicholas cared for the needy.”

There are a number of books about St. Nicholas, including [*St. Nicholas and the Mouse of Myra*](#), which is a graphic novel, and [*The Legend of St. Nicholas*](#).



Christmas around the world

Children all around the world celebrate Jesus’ birth but have many different traditions. If you want to share with your children some of these traditions, the whyChristmas.com website has information on over 70 countries.

For instance, there is extensive information about how St. Lucia’s Day, December 13, is celebrated In Sweden. As you can see in this photo below, part of the tradition involves having girls dressed in white dresses with red sashes wear crowns of candles on their heads.



In Mexico, a popular tradition is Las Posadas, where people re-enact Mary and Joseph's search for lodging in Bethlehem for nine nights before Christmas. You might want to have a Las Posadas instead of the traditional Christmas pageant for a change. You could do this just with the Sunday school or with the whole congregation. The Episcopal Network for Stewardship offers a free [booklet on how to celebrate a Mexican Posada](#).

The Children's Ministry Magazine has instructions for doing a [Mexican Posada with children](#) as well as a simple script. A blog post called "[Resources for Celebrating Las Posadas with Your Child](#)" has some helpful web links.

Using these symbols in Sunday school

There are so many options for using Advent and Christmas symbols in Sunday school – we've just scratched the surface in this webinar. Here's a list of activities you can do based on symbols.

- Crafts
- Books/DVDs
- Songs
- Pageants
- Decorations
- Food
- Games
- Service/missions

There are plenty of Christmas pageants available based on Advent and Christmas symbols and you could also write your own script based on a children's book, such as the ones previously mentioned.

There are also ideas for [games](#) based on Advent and Christmas symbols.

Don't forget to have a service or mission project in your Sunday school to help the children remember that we show our love for Jesus by giving to others.



Additional Websites

[Christmas Symbol Ornaments and Learning Activity](#)

[Printable Christmas Book: The 12 Symbols of Christmas](#)

[Miniature Christmas Symbols Kit](#)

[True Meaning of Christmas](#)

[Christingle: The Christmas Tradition That Only Got Going in the 1960](#)

[The Christingle Service](#)

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Revised June 2019