

Journey to Christmas



Advent Devotional



Welcome to Journey to Christmas!

Advent is a season of preparation in the Christian church. We are preparing to celebrate Jesus' coming as a baby in Bethlehem while also anticipating Christ's coming again to usher in the kingdom of God.

One way of preparing for Jesus to come into our lives is by reading and talking about the stories of those who prepared to welcome him as a baby over two thousand years ago. This devotional booklet explores the stories of Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth, John, Joseph and the shepherds as they are given the good news of Jesus' coming and as they experience the miracle of his birth.



This resource is designed to be adaptable, so you can choose activities that resonate with your family. Some households may want to simply read the scripture and light a candle. Others may want to try multiple activities during the week. Do what works for your household.



Each week, set aside a special time to celebrate Advent with your family. It may be Sunday afternoon as a start to the week, or some other time. Start with the prayer and scripture reading, light the candle in your Advent wreath and choose the activities that suit your family. (Note: See the appendix for Advent Wreath ideas.)

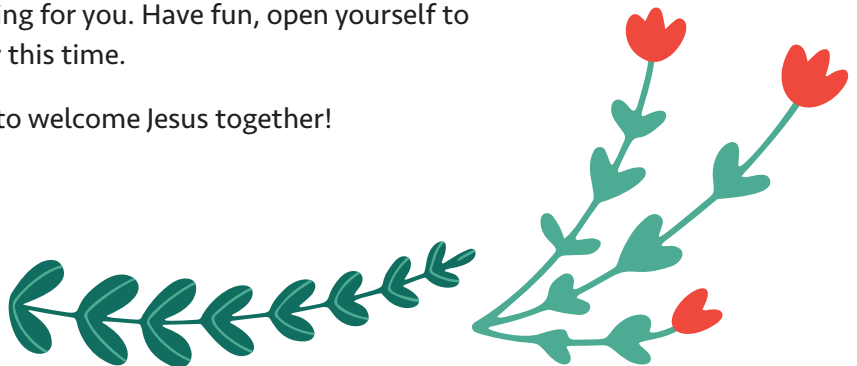
A Note for Congregational Leaders & Christian Educators

Group Experiences of this Resource: If you are encouraging families in your congregation to use this resource, consider incorporating elements of it into children's time during worship or into the Sunday school lesson plan. Or, you may choose to have regular check-in times for those using the resource. Share how the experience is going, share crafts and projects created, discuss insights found and reflections from outreach opportunities.

Advent Wreath Kits: Consider providing an Advent wreath to households in your congregation that would like one. Assembling a wreath could be an afternoon or evening activity for families at the church before Advent begins. Otherwise, the needed materials could be gathered into a colourful bag that is delivered or handed out after worship.

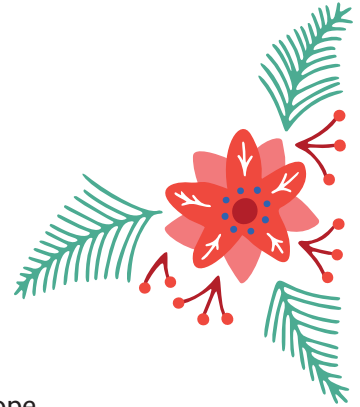
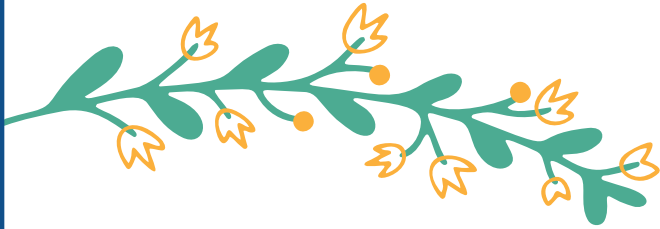
May this devotional time be a blessing for you. Have fun, open yourself to the Spirit's gentle leading and enjoy this time.

Christmas is coming—let's prepare to welcome Jesus together!



Advent Week 1

Hope



Opening

One: God's people wanted the saviour that God promised to come.

All: They waited in hope.

One: The prophets said someone would prepare the way.

All: They waited in hope.

One: We wait for Jesus to come again among us.

All: We wait and watch in hope.

If you have an Advent wreath, light the first weekly candle, the candle of hope.

Prayer

God of Hope, help us as we listen to the story of Zechariah. Remind us how much you love and care for us. Help us to offer your hope to others. Amen.

Meet Zechariah

Zechariah's name means "God remembers." Moses' brother Aaron was his ancestor. Like all the male direct descendants of Aaron, Zechariah was a priest who served in the temple in Jerusalem, the biggest and most important place of worship for Jewish people. There were so many priests that they were divided into 24 groups. Every group served for two weeks each year and at Jewish festivals.

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were old and had not been able to have children. This was challenging for both of them. Nonetheless, they faithfully followed God's commandments. They waited for the Messiah, promised by the prophets for centuries, to come and save them.

Read the Bible story from Luke 1:5-25

Questions for Reflection

1. Zechariah offered incense to God. Have you ever offered something special to God? What was it? How did you feel during that experience?
2. Zechariah and Elizabeth really wanted a baby, but they were old and could not have children. Have you ever hoped or waited for something? What was that experience like for you?
3. Has God ever answered one of your prayers? What was that experience like for you?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do throughout the first week of Advent.

Make a Prayer Chain: Think of people or groups in your community who need hope right now. Write their names on slips of paper that you loop through each other, taping the ends of each slip together to create a paper prayer chain. Put the chain on your Christmas tree and add to it up until Christmas, remembering to pray for the people named.

Make Christmas Tree Ornaments: All you need is flour, salt, water and cinnamon. (*See the recipe at the back of this resource.) After you make these ornaments, think of people you can give them to who need a little extra hope this season.

Play Charades: Think about what it was like for Zechariah, who was unable to speak for many months! How challenging would it be to know a great secret and not be able to speak?! On separate slips of paper, write out moments from the story, or write down Christmas items (e.g., wreath, stockings, gifts, Christmas tree, candles, baby, angel). Place these slips of paper into a bag or hat. Take turns withdrawing slips of paper and acting out the words for the rest of the family.

Create a Window Message: Create a message of hope for your front window for people going by. It could be an image painted on the inside using powdered tempera paints with some water and dish soap mixed in, or a picture coloured on paper or tissue paper, or cut-out letters or symbols taped to the inside of the window (e.g., a heart, a candle, "God loves you" or other ideas you come up with).

Go for a Walk: Take a your neighbourhood and notice Christmas lights and other signs of hope. You might want to enjoy apple cider heated on the stove when you get back.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

God of hope, thank you for the story of Zechariah.
Help us to listen to you and trust you like he did.
Remind us of how much you love and care for us.
Give us the opportunity to share your hope with others this week.
Amen.



Advent Week 2

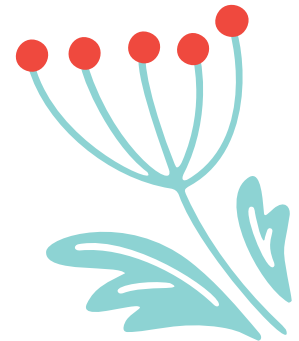
Peace



Opening

If you have an Advent wreath, light the first candle.

- One:** When God asks us to do big and small things,
All: God is with us.
One: When we are worried and have trouble waiting,
All: God is with us.
One: God's love reminds us to not be afraid.
All: God brings us peace.



If you have an Advent wreath, light the second blue or purple candle, the candle of peace.

Prayer

God of Peace, help us as we listen to the story of Mary. Remind us that you are always with us and that we don't need to be afraid. Help us to live in peace with everyone. Amen.

Meet Mary

Mary was a young woman who lived in the village of Nazareth in Galilee. She was a descendent of both King David and Jacob's son Judah. She was also Elizabeth's cousin (Zechariah's wife). She was humble, faithful and chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. Even though she was from the line of David, she did not live in a palace or have a high position in life. She was engaged to a man named Joseph, who was a carpenter, and they lived in a rural village.

When Mary is visited by an angel, she initially shows fear. (Who wouldn't be scared if an angel suddenly appeared in their living room?!) But Mary shows courage in following God's will for her life.

Read the Bible story from Luke 1:26-38

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever been really afraid about something happening in the future? What helped you feel safe, secure or at peace?
2. Why do you think God decided to come to Earth as a baby? Or why do you think God chose Mary to be Jesus' mother?
3. When have you been asked to do something important? What was that experience like?
4. How has God helped you feel peace in challenging times?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do throughout the second week of Advent.

Singalong: When you are singing these songs, consider how you are feeling. Does singing help you feel closer to God? How does music bring peace? What other activities make you feel at peace? Look up these songs on YouTube and sing along: “I’ve Got Peace Like a River,” “God with Us,” (All Sons and Daughters), “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (Book of Praise 112), “Prince of Peace,” or choose your own songs about peace in God.

Make a Crown: Jesus was called the “Prince of Peace,” because he brings peace into the world by rescuing us from our lives of brokenness and reconciling us with God. As a reminder of the Prince of Peace, make a crown for Jesus. Use heavy paper, Bristol board or folded sheets of newspaper. Decorate it however you wish and with whatever materials you have on hand.

Act It Out: Act out each of these words with your bodies and facial expressions: peace, waiting, servant, holy, king, power, throne. Think about what peace looks like on your face and in your body. What are ways that we can show peace within ourselves? What ways do we not show peace within our bodies?

Share Peace: Think of places in your community that need peace. Who are the peacemakers in those places? Some examples of peacemakers in your community might include people who work with those in need—teachers, social workers, faith leaders, first responders, community-building neighbours or others who work in the service industry. Make the peacemakers in your community Christmas cards with words of thanks.

Be a Peacemaker: We live in a world filled with war and strife. From the war in Ukraine, to political tensions in Canada and the United States, to arguments with family or friends, we often struggle to find and make peace. What are some of the ways you can create peace in your home, school, community, church, nation and world? Discuss these as a family and then choose one way to act on this over the next month.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

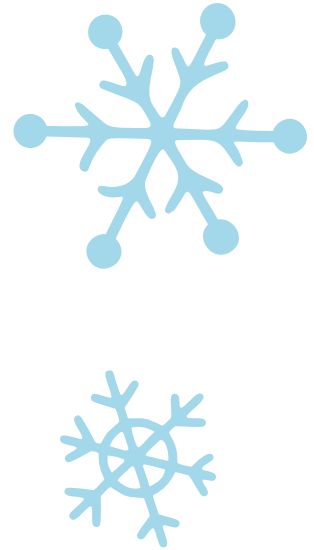
God of Peace, you remind us to be unafraid. You sent Jesus to be our Prince of Peace and our King. He showed us that your ways are peace and love. Fill us with your peace.

Deep peace of the running wave to you,
Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,
Deep peace of the shining stars to you,
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you, forever.
Amen.



Advent Week 3

Joy



Opening

If you have an Advent wreath, light the first two candles.

- One:** God's gifts can surprise us.
- All:** God brings us joy.
- One:** God's plans are to bless us.
- All:** God brings us joy.
- One:** Even when things are difficult,
- All:** We can find joy.

If you have an Advent wreath, light the third/pink candle, the candle of joy.

Prayer

God of Joy, help us as we listen to the story of Elizabeth. Help us to feel your presence. Lift us from sadness into joy. We rejoice and give thanks for all you have done for us. Amen.

Meet Elizabeth

Elizabeth's name means "God's promise." Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, and they lived in the hill country of Judah. She was a relative of Jesus' mother, Mary. Moses' brother Aaron was one of her ancestors. Just like Aaron, Elizabeth was an Israelite and she stayed faithful to God, following God's commandments. In the nativity story, Elizabeth is already old and did not have any children. God gave her the miraculous gift of a son named John. This John is later known as John the Baptist, the one who baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River.

Read the Bible story from Luke 1:39-56

Questions for Reflection

1. When have you felt joyful about something? How is joy different from happiness?
2. Where are the different points in the story where someone feels/shows joy? What does this tell us about the different ways joy can be felt?
3. How can we experience joy during the Advent season? Why do we associate joy with Christmas? Are there ways to be joyful even when times are challenging?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do throughout the third week of Advent.

Craft a Table Runner: One way we can practice joy is by celebrating with gratitude around the dinner table together and sharing a meal. A table runner is a long, narrow cloth that runs the length of the table. To make a table runner, you can use a strip of fabric or felt, or you can even tape some sheets of paper together end-to-end. Decorate your table runner with designs or words or pictures that will welcome guests to your table. You can even ask your guests this Christmas season to add a word or picture to it of other reminders of joy!

Bake Christmas Cookies: Use your favourite family recipes to bake cookies/bars this week. Then deliver plates of cookies to someone who needs to experience a little extra joy this season! Perhaps you have a family member experiencing loneliness, a friend who is unhappy, an elderly person in your congregation, or a neighbour in the hospital who could benefit from your shared joy!

Create Poetry: Experiences of joy are often fleeting, but they can be remembered in songs and other forms of art. Mary sang a song of gratitude to God, expressing her many feelings of joy during her pregnancy and her time spent with Elizabeth. Write a song or create a poem about a joyful experience you have had and how God acted in your life. An easy way to start writing poetry is to create an acrostic, which uses the letters of one word to create other words. For example:

- J – jovial merriment
- O – others come together
- Y – Yuletide blessings

Make Merry Music: Grab some instruments (guitar, piano, drum, etc.), or make your own shakers with recycled containers and popcorn kernels and make a joyful noise. You can sing “Joyful, Joyful We Adore You” (Book of Praise 410), “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (Book of Praise 112), or other joyful songs. Kids of all ages will enjoy making melodies with their voices and bodies.

Share the Table: Elizabeth hosted Mary for months while she was pregnant. Consider what it means to host others. What can you do to help other people feel “at home” in your home? Who in your community needs a home this season or a hot meal? With the permission of your parents, invite a family member or someone in your community to stay with you, either for a meal or the whole season. How might you spark joy in someone else’s life by opening your home to them?

Closing Prayer and Blessing

God of Joy, thank you for bringing goodness into our lives.
Thank you for asking us to love each other so that our joy may be full.
Help us to remember those who don’t have what they need.
May we feel your joy and may it spill out onto those who need it.
Amen.



Advent Week 4

Love



Opening

If you have an Advent wreath, light the first three candles.

One: God names us and claims us.

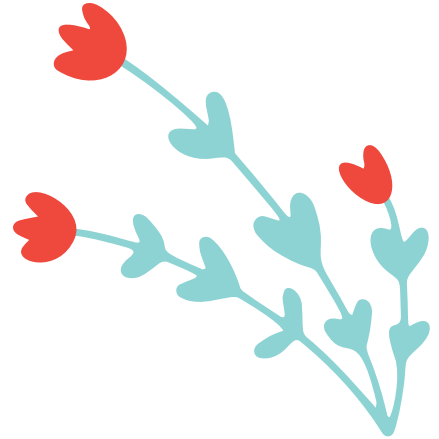
All: God is love.

One: God rescues and forgives us.

All: God is love.

One: God prepares wonderful things for us.

All: God's love has no end.



If you have an Advent wreath, light the third purple or blue candle, the candle of love.

Prayer

God of Love, help us as we listen to the story of John. Remind us of all that you have done for your people. Help us to trust in your love and show your love to others. Amen.

Meet John

John, whose name means "God is gracious," was named by God through the angel Gabriel. John was the baby born to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. He was promised to be like the great prophet Elijah. He was to tell people how they could be saved and to make them turn their hearts back to God. His mission was to prepare people for the coming Saviour.

Read the Bible story from Luke 1:57-80

Questions for Reflection

1. Why was your name chosen for you? What is the significance of your name? Do you have a nickname that people call you that has a special meaning?
2. John came into the world to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. What ways can we prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmastime each year? How can we participate in making room for the kingdom of God every day?
3. We celebrate love in the fourth week of advent. How can you show the love of Jesus to neighbours in special ways this season? What might this look like for your family?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do throughout the fourth week of Advent.

Artwork: Draw or paint a picture of something that stands out to you in the story. What colours will you use? Which characters stick out in your mind? What do you feel when you read the story?

Act Out the Story: Have someone in the family pretend to be a reporter and ask questions about the various characters from the Bible story—Elizabeth, Zechariah, a neighbour, etc. What are some questions you might ask Elizabeth and Zechariah after such a miraculous event?

Love Your Neighbour: Think of a young family in your neighbourhood or congregation who you can show love to this Christmas. Could you cook them a meal, or make them something special as a gift, or pray for them this holiday season?

Love Your Family: Decorate an envelope for each member of your household and put them on your mantel or Christmas tree. Have everyone draw or write a message for each family member telling them why they love them. Put the messages in the envelopes to open Christmas morning.

Share the Love of Jesus: Think of a person or group of people who might be having an especially challenging time this holiday season. As a family, decide on a way to show the love of Jesus to a person or group in your community you might not know. This could mean your family putting on a concert at a long-term care home, serving soup at a shelter for people without houses, or welcoming in a family that is new to Canada.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

God of Love, you bring people to love into our lives.
Thank you for families, neighbours and friends.
Thank you for asking us to share your love, even when it's not easy.
May we bring more and more love to people who need it.
Amen.



Christmas Eve



Opening

If you have an Advent wreath, light the four candles on the outside circle.

One: God sent Jesus.

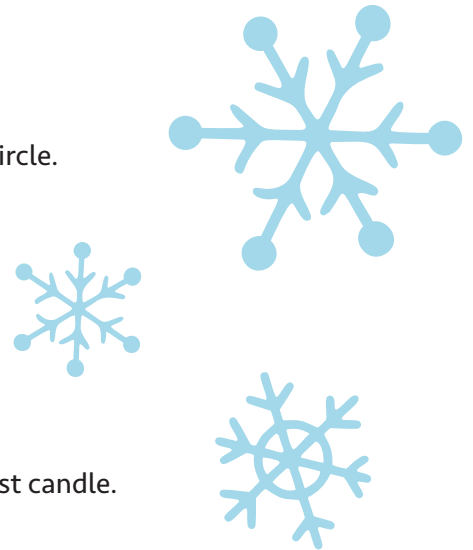
All: Jesus was born for all.

One: Joseph and Mary did what God asked.

All: Jesus was born for all.

One: Tonight, we remember God's greatest gift.

All: Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.



If you have an Advent wreath, light the white centre candle, the Christ candle.

Prayer

God who sent us Jesus, help us as we listen to the story of Jesus' birth. Remind us that Jesus is what is most important about Christmas. Help us to make room for him in our lives. Amen.

Meet Joseph

Joseph was a carpenter from Nazareth. He was a Jewish descendent of King David. He was a good man who cared very much about Mary, who he was engaged to. When he found out Mary was pregnant, he wondered what he should do. He was told by an angel in a dream that the baby Mary was carrying came from God and that he should marry Mary and look after her and the child.

Read the Bible story from Luke 2:1-7

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you think Joseph felt when he found out that he would be the dad of the Son of God?
2. Why does it matter to us today that Jesus was born? Why is it significant that Jesus came into the world as a baby, born from Mary?
3. What do you think it means that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us?
4. How can you make room for Jesus in your life?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do on Christmas Eve.

Sing Christmas Carols: "Away in a Manger," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "Silent Night," etc.

Bake: Using a mix or a favourite recipe, bake cupcakes or a cake for Christmas day to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Talk about what gifts you might bring for Jesus on his birthday.

Go for a Walk: Go outside for a long walk. Considering carrying something heavy (like a backpack with books in it). Imagine that you are Mary or Joseph walking for a few days to get to Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus. What might that have been like? Discuss how you might have experienced this journey. What feelings might come up while walking and preparing for the birth of the son of God?

Read Proverbs: Isaiah 9:6-7 is a Jewish prophecy talking about the coming Saviour. Write out the words that describe the coming Saviour. What do they mean to you? If you have your own family crèche or nativity, set it up and talk through the story.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

God, we thank you this holy night that you chose to be with us.
Thank you for Mary and Joseph. Thank you for loving us and
sending Jesus to be the saviour of all the Earth. Amen.



Christmas Day



Opening

If you have an Advent wreath, light the four candles around the outside.

One: God sent angels to sing about Jesus.

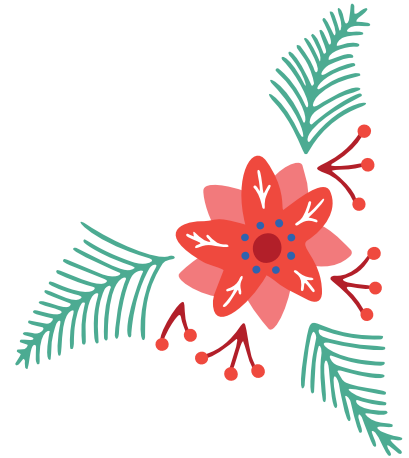
All: Jesus is here!

One: Shepherds went to find Him.

All: Jesus is here!

One: We can find Him, too.

All: Jesus has come for us.



If you have an Advent wreath, light the white centre candle, the Christ candle.

Prayer

God who saves us, help us as we listen to the story of the shepherds. As we celebrate Christmas, remind us that Jesus is with us. Help us to grow in love for him and for our neighbours. Amen.

Meet Jesus

A saviour had been promised for centuries by God's prophets. Jesus' name means "the Lord saves." Gabriel told Mary what his name would be, and another angel told Joseph the same thing in a dream. Jesus has many other names—anointed Saviour, Prince of Peace, Son of the Most High, Son of God, Great Shepherd of the Sheep, Messiah, and Emmanuel, God with us. He came in the line of King David. Through Him, God's promise to David of an eternal lineage out of the family of Jesse came to fruition. He was fully divine and fully human. He was God in human flesh, sent so that we could be close to God. Jesus is Christ, our King.

Read the Bible story from Luke 2:8–20

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think Mary and Joseph were surprised to have visitors? Why?
2. Who do you think the shepherds told about Jesus' birth? Who can you tell about Jesus? Why is Jesus so important?
3. Have you ever had a miraculous experience like the shepherds had? What was that like?

Activity Options

Choose one (or more) of these activity options to do on Christmas Day.

Make a Luminary: A luminary is a lamp. Create one using a clear glass jar. Take black construction paper or white paper and cut a strip as tall as the jar. If using white paper, paint it or colour it black and wait for the paper to dry. Punch holes in it with a single hole punch or cut small star shapes out of the paper. Wrap the paper around the jar, trim off the extra paper and glue or tape the ends together. Place a battery-operated candle or tea light inside. Talk about how Jesus came to be the light of the world. How does light shine in the darkness?

Gift for Jesus: Give everyone a strip of paper and have them write or draw on it a gift that they can give to Jesus. The papers can be put in a gift box of some kind, or in a jar, or in your manger. Include a gift tag or a sign that reads "For Jesus." What does it mean to give gifts to Jesus?

Consider the Lonely: Phone people who you know are spending Christmas alone and wish them a Merry Christmas. Consider dropping off a care package of extra baking or other treats, or invite them into your home for Christmas.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

Holy God, you sent Jesus to be the light of the world. Help us to see Jesus and to see his light in others. Help us to celebrate that you kept your promise and sent a saviour for us. May we remember him not just today but every day. Amen.



Other Recommended Resources

1. The picture book *Voices of Christmas* by Nikki Grimes has a reflection by each of the main players and some fringe characters in the Advent and Christmas story and includes a CD as well as a challenge to the reader.
2. *Unwrapping the Greatest Gift* by Ann Voskamp follows the stories and symbols from the Jesse tree. It makes the gift of Jesus come alive in beautiful text and illustrations.
3. *Look: A Child's Guide to Advent & Christmas* by Laura Alary is great for exploring feelings and activities about the season along with its stories in accessible language.

Recipe



Session 1: Cinnamon Salt Ornaments

Jo-Anna Rooney,

<https://aprettylifeinthesuburbs.com/cinnamon-salt-ornaments/#tasty-recipes-48915-jump-target>

Ingredients:

- 1 cup flour
- 1/2 cup salt
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 – 2 tbsp cinnamon

1. Preheat your oven to 250 degrees F.
2. Combine all ingredients in a bowl, roll into a ball of dough.
3. Then roll out the dough to 1/4-inch thick.
4. Cut out the dough into shapes, using cookie cutters. Keep rolling out the small scraps of dough and make ornaments until the dough is all gone.
5. Using a toothpick, make a hole somewhere on the ornament so it can be strung.
6. Bake at 250 degrees F for about 2 hours or let air dry.
7. Run a piece of ribbon or twine through the holes and hang them up!

Make an Advent Wreath

Check out Tori Smit's post on Advent Wreaths at <http://www.cnob.org/?p=1923>.



presbyterian.ca/worship
1-800-619-7301
50 Wynford Dr. Toronto, ON M3C 1J7