

A classical painting depicting the Annunciation. An angel with large, feathered wings, wearing a blue and gold robe, floats in the upper right, pointing her right index finger down towards the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is seated on the left, wearing a red gown with a blue mantle, her hands clasped in prayer and her gaze directed upwards. In the upper left, two other angels are partially visible, looking down. The scene is set in a room with a checkered floor, a red draped chair on the right, and a basket with white cloth on the floor in the foreground. The background is a soft, cloudy sky.

Angels We Have Heard on High

Family Prayers and Activities
to Celebrate the Blessed Sounds
of the Lord's Coming

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Do You Hear What I Hear?

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” —Isaiah 40:3

Advent is a time for tuning our ears to the wondrous sounds of God’s coming. We hear the clarion tolling of bells, the stirring hymns of carolers, the soothing bubble of hot chocolate, the bracing crunch of winter snow, and the exhilarating tearing of wrapping paper. In the film, *The Polar Express*, only those who preserve childlike faith retain the capacity to hear the magical chiming of the first gift of Christmas. Our carols foster such youthful attentiveness: “Sleigh bells ring; are you listening?”

Faith develops a heightened sense of hearing with the approach of Christ’s birth. Those who believe are blessed to catch mystical sounds that fall on deaf ears when listening is confined to the realms of the literal or scientific. Christians hear the voices of angels carried on the wind, messengers of good news in word and song. They pick up the calls of prophets bidding us to clear a path for the Lord in the chaotic wilderness of our lives. They are attuned to the sounds of swords being beaten into plowshares. Most of all, they hear the cries of the poor during this season, enlisting our hearts in the happy duty of compassion.

The voices of the consumer culture conspire to distract us from the songs of prophets and angels with gleeful proclamations of material wonders. Meanwhile, we bustle frantically through the season in danger of allowing internal dissonance to drown out the disarming coos of infants, the rousing laughter of children, and the “silent nights” in which God is born. Those blessed to discover that the night wind can indeed speak to a little lamb—or a Lamb of God—embrace the opportunity to be witnesses of sound as well as sight. We spend these holy days gladly proclaiming to the spiritually deaf, “Do you hear what I hear?”

The Violent and Gentle Sounds of Peace

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks. —Isaiah 2:4*



In our media saturated age, we are well acquainted with the sounds of war. On the evening news, we are subjected to the harsh staccato of automatic weapons, the whoosh of rockets, and the thunder of bombs. Veterans of war may physically flinch as these sounds resurrect their shell shock. Meanwhile, our children play video games that eerily mimic the horrors of battle. Yet, we are mistaken if we believe that the transition to a world of peace will come quietly or gently. The prophet reminds us that implements of war are transformed into tools of peace through the violent beating of swords into plows. Our spirits must also be reformed through the beating of anger into serenity and the pounding of hate into forgiveness. Still, faith suggests that baptismal water may be the most powerful means to this end, like the water of a stream that reshapes rough rock into smooth, sturdy stones for the building of God's peaceable kingdom.

Activity: Let each family member pound once or twice with a hammer on an old metal pipe or bar. Then take turns pouring water from a pitcher over a stone in a basin.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, help us to disarm ourselves of the weapons of anger, resentment, bitterness, and hatred. Teach us to use our hands to fashion gifts of beauty and love.

Eating Our Words of Faith

Only speak the word and my servant will be healed. —Matthew 8:8



Words are powerful expressions of our beliefs. When we are too bold with our claims, someone may challenge our credibility by declaring, “I’m going to make you eat your words.” For Christians, however, eating words is a not a defeat, but a holy sacrament. At every Mass we consume the bread of the Word and the bread of the Eucharist, knowing that in the realm of sacraments, “You are what you eat.” During the season of Advent, we pay particular attention to the words of the prophets like those expressed in the seven *O Antiphons*. These beautiful scripture based phrases celebrate our faith in the gift of the Messiah: “O root of Jesse,” “O key of David,” “O Emmanuel.” As we feast on these nourishing words, the letter “O” seems appropriate, for saying it forms our mouths in expressions of awe, wonder, and praise like the ones that will soon hail Christ’s birth as we sing, *O Holy Night*.

Activity: Use alphabet cereal to form words that express the meaning of Christmas, then eat your words to make them part of you. You can also write the words, then eat alphabet soup.

Prayer: Jesus, you are the Word made flesh. May the inspiring words of this season become part of our bodies and souls.

Marching to a Different Drummer

Not by appearance shall he judge nor by hearsay shall he decide.

—Isaiah 11:3



After our second grandson was born, it soon became obvious that he was different from his older brother. From the start he was more outspoken and insistent on doing things his own way. At times it was a challenge to apply necessary discipline while still affirming the uniqueness of a child who moved to a different beat. The scribes and Pharisees made no secret of their disdain for the Lord's habit of marching to a different drummer: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" *The Little Drummer Boy* is one of the most iconic and beloved Christmas carols. The poor boy in the song might easily have stayed away out of shame for his poverty, but the beat of his internal drum urged him onward to play for the Lord. May we all be so bold during this beautiful season to march to the beat of the divine drummer we hear and proudly step forward to play before the Lord.

Activity: Pass around a real or makeshift drum. Let each person tap out a unique beat. Discuss how you work and play together.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach us to affirm the gifts and rhythms of each person, but also to live and work together in peace. us. Open our eyes to see your glory hidden in plain sight.

The Sacrament of Holy Communication

Jesus broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. —Matthew 15:36



Most of us have at least one unhappy experience of a silent meal with family or friends. This silence is deafening, for there is no more obvious indication of conflict than when people eat without conversation. The sacrament of Eucharist is called communion. Every time we partake of the Eucharist we *communicate* with each other. When communication breaks down, the sacrament is diminished and the bond of community is strained or broken. That is why the scripture bids us to make peace with our sisters and brothers before coming to the Lord's table to offer our gifts. To heal a broken or strained relationship, we must share our praise and thanks, but we must also reveal our hurts and needs. This sharing leads to "holy communion." Let us practice the sacrament of holy communication in this season of peace.

Activity: At dinner, break one dinner roll or slice of bread into pieces. Have each member consume one piece as a sign of unity.

Prayer: Triune God, give us the courage to communicate with each other so that we may become one body in Christ.

The Comforting Sound of Solid Ice

Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. —Matthew 7:24



I skated on frozen Wisconsin lakes as a youth, so my ears have been well tuned to the sound of solid, dependable ice. I have also seen the warning signs that apply to skaters in both sport and life, “Danger, thin ice!” In the classic holiday movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the hero’s brother almost drowns after falling through the ice. There is something unmistakable about the sound and feel of thin ice. We hear the telltale cracking that signals potential disaster for those who would venture too far. The word of God is like solid ice or solid ground. We may walk, skate, or build on it without fear of falling through. By contrast, the words of popular culture are sometimes shallow and unreliable. They bid us to skate on the thin ice of fame, fortune, or trivialities. During Advent we skate on the solid surface of God’s word.

Activity: Freeze two inches of water for hours in a small plastic bowl. Freeze a second bowl of water for 90 minutes. At dinner, compare the two. Discuss how to recognize solid footing in life.

Prayer: God, our rock, we trust in your love as the solid surface on which we can glide freely and safely forward.

The Messianic Secret

*Jesus ordered them, “See that no one knows of this.”
But they went away and spread the news about him. —Matthew 9:30*



The Messianic secret is a theological puzzle that biblical scholars have wrestled with for centuries. Why would the Savior of the world make repeated efforts to hide his identity and works? Is this humility? Is it Jesus employing reverse psychology? Is it the evangelist using a literary device to highlight the paradoxical significance of an obscure historical figure? No explanation is completely satisfactory, but we have seen modern heroes who shun the limelight while relegating their deeds to something anyone would do. In any case, the Lord's secret is out now and Christ makes no secret of our importance: "You are the light of the world! No one leaves a light under a basket, but puts it on a stand to give light to all in the house." As we spread the good news, however, we do not seek our own glory, but the glory of God and the welfare of the world.

Activity: Dim the lights and light a candle. Then cover it with a large basket. Have each member uncover the light and commit to doing a kind deed this weekend.

Prayer: Saving Lord, what we hear in the dark, we must speak in the light. May we never hide your light that shines through us.

The Voice that Shows the Way

*Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
“This is the way; walk in it.” —Isaiah 30:21*



In an 80's TV show, detective Thomas Magnum often referred to his “little voice.” This was the voice that spoke to him in tough spots and suggested a wise course of action. I once made a sudden job change based on a similar experience. As I sat in my office, it was as if a mystical voice was telling me in no uncertain terms, “This is not where you are supposed to be.” These experiences are difficult to explain and may also be met with skepticism, even condemnation. Joan of Arc was martyred for claiming to hear God's voice. Yet, faith insists that the Lord speaks to us and, if we listen, shows us the way. Advent is a time to embrace the mysterious reality of annunciation. It is a time to tune our ears to the voice of God that can come to us in any number of ways. In the parlance of faith, this is called, “vocation,” the experience of being called to do God's will.

Activity: Have each family member draw a map of their life thus far. Include the starting point, significant waypoints, and the intended destination. Be creative and share your maps.

Prayer: Lord, Jesus, you are the way, the truth, and the life. Speak to us by your coming and show us the way.

Gather Around the Roaring Fire

*I baptize you with water for repentance.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. —Matthew 3:11*



My wife and I enjoyed a wood fireplace in our home for many years. I can still hear the sounds it made when it reached full blaze. Like *Rice Krispies*, it would snap, crackle, and pop, recalling the classic holiday lyric, “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.” Those dynamic sounds were signs of fire’s power to steel us from the harsh winter cold and illuminate our family room with a soft, ethereal glow. Yet, whenever we moved too close, we were aware of fire’s capacity to burn us. We also learned that we had to stoke the fire and add wood to keep it burning. Jesus said, “I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already blazing.” The light of Christ gathers us, but it must be approached reverently with due respect for its power to sear away dead wood from our lives. We must also stoke the fire with our witness and fuel it with our good works.

Activity: Gather around your fireplace or a large burning candle. Sit quietly for a bit and enjoy the light, heat, and sound of fire.

Prayer: Light of Christ, gather us around your flame. Fill us with a vibrant faith that pops with fire and crackles with life.

Can You Hear Me Now?

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unstopped. —Isaiah 35:5*



Parents and teachers, in a moment of exasperation, have been known to cry out to an unruly child, “Do you hear me?!” In these instances, we understand that individuals with perfectly healthy ears can suffer deafness due to apathy, anger, preoccupation, ignorance, or smugness. Perhaps the most haunting examples of deafness involve suicides after no one hears a silent cry for help or shootings after no one heeds disturbing warning signs. We are not to live in paralyzing guilt over such mysterious and complex tragedies. Rather, in an era when cell phones, mp3 players, or general preoccupation can plug up our ears, we clear our hearts and souls to hear the cry of the poor, the desperate, and the lonely. Collectively, we want to be like state of the art cell phone networks that cover the whole world with compassion so that no one in pain has to wonder, “Can you hear me now?”

Activity: Read a bible passage softly with everyone covering their ears. Then read again with ears open. Discuss ways to better hear each other in daily life.

Prayer: Compassionate God, heal our spiritual deafness so that we may be instruments of your love and mercy.

The Song of Creation

*Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
Let the sea and all that fills it resound. —Psalm 96:11*



As a native of Colorado, I was blessed to grow up hearing the cosmic hymn of praise extolled by the great mystics in their writings. High up in the mountains, I became accustomed to the centering rhythm of a flowing stream, the rousing song of a windy canyon, and the vibrant voices of wildlife. In God's creation, "the rivers clap their hands" and if people remain silent, "the very stones will shout" God's praise. The Lord is born surrounded by creation where "heaven and nature sing" while "fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy." These mystical hymns take practice to hear, because our literal, scientific age often distrusts or suppresses them. Advent is a season to give thanks for the revelation of nature and to study her somewhat foreign language. Once we become fluent, we can hear creation's lovely song of praise for all that is.

Activity: Get to a quiet place—a nearby park, the place where you cut a Christmas tree, or simply a quiet room. Listen to sounds that echo within and around you in the quiet.

Prayer: Lord of life, all of creation sings the wondrous hymn that tells of your glory, your mystery, and your beauty.

The Breath of God

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles. —Isaiah 40:31*



Wind is a two-sided reality. It can uproot a tree, but also carry the seeds that plant new ones. It can reduce a sure home run to a routine fly, then lift a “can of corn” over the fence. We blow to extinguish candles, but also to fan embers into a flame. As the breath of God’s spirit, wind knows its dual commission to tear down and build up, to uproot and to plant. As a child, I delighted in blowing dandelion seeds into the wind, unaware that my fun was spreading weeds. Jesus does the opposite when he breathes on the disciples, imparting the Spirit that would sow God’s word through them. People of faith trust the wind like they believe in God. They may not be able to see it, but they hear it quite clearly and see its effects. Today we celebrate the audible power of the wind—its unsettling roar, its melodic whistle, and its gentle caress of God’s breath upon us. Without the wind of the Spirit, no eagle will ever soar and no child of God will ever take flight.

Activity: Inhale deeply to hear your breath. Blow into your hand to hear and feel the wind. Parents may also blow gently on the forehead of each child like Jesus breathed on the disciples.

Prayer: Breath of God, may we open our hearts and our wings to catch the uplifting wind of your Spirit.

The Gap Between Saying and Hearing

Let anyone with ears listen! —Matthew 11:15



When I taught communication skills, I often greeted my students with the following proposition: “I don’t know what I said until I know what you heard.” Anyone who has ever written a heartfelt letter or presented a passionate appeal knows how easy it is for concern to be misinterpreted as intrusion or zeal to be mistaken for anger. This is why we so often end up apologizing to our loved ones while explaining “what we really meant to say.” Perhaps this gap between what is said and what is heard gave rise to the concept of “active listening” in communication. When we listen actively, we reflect back to the speaker what we hear so that the message may be affirmed or clarified. God uttered the living Word of Jesus over two thousand years ago and Christians still cannot agree on what God was really saying. We must be active listeners in faith, constantly dialoguing with God and each other so we may hear the Word of God more clearly.

Activity: Play word association. After one person says a word, each person says the first word that comes to mind. Include words like “family,” “friendship,” “love,” “trust,” and “God.”

Prayer: Living Word of God, give us the ears to hear and the mouths to speak so that we may grow in understanding and love

The Gift of Being in Sync

*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
We wailed, and you did not mourn. —Matthew 11:17*



My wife hates it when—as she puts it—we are “out of sync.” This can happen when I am feeling up, but she is feeling down or when I am quiet, but she needs to talk. We can be out of sync with the seasons of faith as well, like when we give birth during Lent or must plan a funeral during the holidays. Such experiences are a bit like playing two adjacent keys on a piano. The clashing sound they make reflects the internal dissonance we feel. Coping with discord in our lives is part of the human condition. Musical dissonance is resolved by playing two keys that are further apart. Sometimes we must give ourselves or our loved ones a bit of space to relieve tension. Faith suggests that our patience and mutual support in these situations helps restore harmony. We may not always feel like dancing or wailing on cue, but we can always be moved by the rhythmic, patient harmony of love.

Activity: Play two adjacent piano or keyboard notes that clash. Then play a harmonious chord by moving one finger over a key. Discuss how your family deals with tension.

Prayer: Lord of glory, you prayed that we may all be one. Give us the grace to live in harmony with each other and the world.

When Toys Talk Too Much

Shepherd of Israel, listen, guide of the flock of Joseph. —Psalm 80:2



Modern toys love to talk, beep, sing, or play music. These toys can be marvelous, but children miss something vital if toys do all the talking. In the *Toy Story* movies, even though the toys can speak, they intentionally remain silent when children are around. It is magical to watch a child carry on a make-believe dialogue with a mute doll or action figure, eagerly supplying both sides of the conversation. Such toys nurture our children's imaginations and allow them to learn the fine art of dialogue in relationships. Children of God are also called to master the gift of dialogue in prayer. Since God is often silent in this conversation, speaking to us in varied and mysterious non-verbal ways, faith must fill in the dialogue and determine God's meaning or message. We are not toys with pull strings, after all, but free and beloved disciples of Christ who are called to relay the voice of God to the world.

Activity: Using the key figures from a crèche, have your children role play a dialogue about Christ's birth.

Prayer: Gracious God, we are free to speak our hearts in prayer. May we also be your voice of peace and justice in the world.

The Winter of Our Discontent

*Beloved, do not grumble against one another,
so that you may not be judged. —James 5:9*



It is a revelation to go back to the stores on the day after Christmas and see how many people return gifts. Many of these returns are defective, but many are retuned simply because they are deemed unsatisfactory. Perhaps the habit of returning things carries a danger of nurturing discontentment. After all, even God's gifts may not always measure up to our expectations. We think we are too short, too shy, too serious, or too ordinary. The difference, of course, is that we seldom have the luxury of returning God's gifts. Our talents, appearance, family, and personality are not easily exchanged for the perfect model or upgrade. Stores thrive on the mantra of "customer satisfaction," but God's ways prosper through the grace of gratitude. Advent is an opportunity time to appreciate what we have and to share our gifts with those less fortunate.

Activity: Have each person list some gifts they have received from God. Discuss the uniqueness and potential of these gifts.

Prayer: Bountiful God, you pour out your blessings upon us. Give us the grace to appreciate and share our unique gifts.

If a Christian Falls in the Forest

*No one is disgraced who waits for you,
but only those who lightly break faith. —Psalm 25:3*



The philosopher poses a vexing question: “If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?” In other words, does falling have any consequence if no one is present to witness it? People of faith could pose a similar query: “If a Christian falls in the forest, does it make a sound?” It is not uncommon to hear people defend actions committed in private: “What I do in the privacy of my own home is my business.” It is an appealing theory, but Christian morality begs to differ. When a fragile ornament falls from a tree, even though the family is out, they still must pick up the pieces upon their return. Both sin and virtue are eminently communal acts. We are uplifted by the goodness of others, but we must also clean up after their brokenness. As fragile ornaments on God’s tree of life, let us strive to inspire others by our goodness instead of leaving them a mess to clean up.

Activity: Drop an unneeded ornament on a tile or hardwood floor. Carefully place the pieces next to a favorite unbroken one. Pass around the whole ornament so that each may cradle it.

Prayer: Gracious God, you made us to reflect your beauty in the world. May we handle ourselves and others with care.

The Blessed Sound of Rain

*May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth. —Psalm 72:6*



There is an old song that bids us to “listen to the rhythm of the falling rain.” Strangely, like many popular tunes about rain, it is a sad song. Faith suggests that we should love the rain. The sound of rain is the sound of God watering the earth, inviting growth and rebirth. It is the baptismal sound of our spirits being washed in a heavenly shower of divine life. During Advent, it is the sound of the heavens opening to rain down the Just One: “Let justice descend, O heavens, like dew from above; like gentle rain let the skies drop it down.” I remember laughing as a child while playing in the rain. I recall listening to the steady patter of rain on our roof and feeling my spirit being restored. Advent is a season to hear the rhythm of the falling rain, for it is the blessed rhythm of God’s cyclic and faithful coming into our lives.

Activity: Take turns sprinkling a plant. Then dip your fingers in the water and bless yourselves with this sign of our baptism.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the blessed rain that waters the arid soil of our lives. Shower your grace and mercy upon us.

Catching the Language of Dreams

*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,
“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” —Matthew 1:20*



While I was writing a memoir, the writing process stirred up my subconscious with powerful dreams about the significant people in my life. Over the course of several months, I met family members, good friends, mentors, and colleagues, both alive and dead. These were moving, visceral experiences of how deeply connected I was to these people. Native Americans place dream catchers over the beds of their children in order to snare bad dreams before they drift down to haunt their young. Yet, we might also wish to catch the blessed, comforting dreams that unite us beyond the realm of time. We often don't remember our dreams or they become muddled after we awaken. So it is that we do well to preserve visions of sugarplums that dance in our heads and visions of peace and justice that realize God's reign.

Activity: Make a simple dream catcher or print a picture of one. Let each person hold it while sharing a dream for the world this Christmas.

Prayer: Lord of hope, you stir up our dreams with your Spirit. Give us the heart to realize your dream of peace and justice.

The Grace of Being Speechless

Because you did not believe my words, you will become mute.

—*Luke 1:20*



In the film, *A Christmas Story*, Ralphie is punished for swearing by having a bar of soap placed in his mouth. In the gospel, Zechariah is rendered mute for his failure in faith. Perhaps the best response to being rendered speechless, then, is to embrace it as a gift and ponder its life lesson. The two human experiences most suited to silence are the times of miracle and tragedy. The former silence is reverent awe in the face of divine power; the latter is confusion over the mystery of God's apparent absence. On these occasions, we freely wash our mouths of things to say that can't possibly describe the glory or cannot hope to solve the mystery. The Christmas story includes both the birth of Christ and the killing of the Holy Innocents. In the wake of both realities, we heed Scripture's wisdom: "It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord."

Activity: Pass a bar of soap and have each person touch it gently to their lips as a pledge to use speech and silence responsibly.

Prayer: Word made flesh, quiet us in moments of miracle and tragedy so that we may ponder your glory and your mystery.

When We Can Hear the Wheels Turning

*Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word.” —Luke 1:38*



At the Annunciation, perhaps Gabriel could hear Mary's wheels turning as she pondered his startling declaration. In the end, Mary chose to cooperate with God's plan without hesitation. God's ways require cooperation that is the spiritual counterpart to the gears turning inside a trusty Swiss watch. If we remove one gear, the whole mechanism grinds to a halt. Similarly, in the board game, *Mousetrap*, the mouse will not be caught if one piece is left out. The genealogy of Christ suggests that the Messiah could not have been born without the cooperation of a long line of faithful ancestors. There is a violent video game called *Gears of War*. Faith reminds us that there are also "gears of justice" and "gears of peace." Each of us must play our part if God's kingdom is to operate like a well-oiled machine.

Activity: Open an old watch and take out the gears or print images of gears from online. Give one gear to each person and interlock them as a pledge of family and faith cooperation.

Prayer: Saving Lord, we are precious in your sight. Help us each to play our part faithfully in the kingdom of God.

The Power of Children's Laughter

*As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,
the child in my womb leaped for joy. —Luke 1:44*



In the animated film, *Monsters Inc.*, monsters create and store energy by scaring little children. Eventually they learn that the laughter of children is a much more powerful source of energy, so they decide to make them laugh instead. In the Scriptures, the faithful are often reassured, “Do not be afraid.” Jesus comes, not to prompt fear, but that our joy may be complete. It is a great gift to know that one’s appearance incites joy, like when we hear someone say, “I’m so happy to see you.” Even before his birth, the presence of Jesus stirs joy in the infant residing in the womb of Elizabeth. Let us listen to the sound of children’s laughter during the holidays. Let us be sources of such laughter rather than prompters of frowns or tears. Let us be Christ for one another so that we may bring joy to the hearts of God’s people.

Activity: Read the newspaper comics together or share funny stories or watch a funny movie to share the gift of laughter.

Prayer: Spirit of God, let your gift of laughter well up from our hearts so we may welcome the child who brings joy to the world.

Reading God's Sign Language

The Lord himself will give you a sign: the young woman shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. —Isaiah 7:14



I have had the opportunity to attend a number of liturgies that included an interpreter for the hearing impaired. On such occasions, I find myself drawn to the power of that nonverbal communication. Having listened to most readings many times, I hear them in a new way as I watch the interpreter sign the various phrases. Nonverbal communication can be like that. It can open up new pathways of hearing and create intimate bonds among individuals who share a common sign language. Our faith is brimming with signs and symbols that speak to us of God's presence in non-verbal ways. We make the sign of the cross; we bow and genuflect; we join or open our hands at the Our Father; we share the sign of peace; and we eat the bread of life. Let us treasure the sign language of our faith, for these symbols unite us in the common and graceful vocabulary of sacraments.

Activity: Gather some mementoes and keepsakes in your home that convey special meanings without words. Share the stories and experiences behind these symbols.

Prayer: Loving God, we hear your voice and feel your presence in the rich signs and symbols of our faith.

The Affirming Sound of Our Names

But his mother said, “No, he is to be called John.” —Luke 1:60



Hearing our name spoken from the mouth of a parent is a moving and affirming sound. It conveys the sense of being personally known and cherished, no longer an anonymous everyman or woman, but someone who belongs to a family. The calling of our name suggests that we have unique gifts, dreams, and potentials. Yet, names also link us to history and purpose, to great figures who may inspire or guide the direction of our lives. Our baptismal names link us through grace to the family of God. Thus, our new pope chose the name, Francis, and the legacy of that name was immediately apparent in his humble, simple, and personal ways. Thus, parents should choose names with due reverence for both individuality and community, the future and the past. Perhaps the grace of hearing our names is best stated by the prophet Isaiah: “I have called you by name; you are mine.”

Activity: Go around the table at dinner and address each person by name. Share with your children why you chose their names.

Prayer: Father, you call us by name and we are yours. May we live up to the legacy of Christ in whose name we are all chosen.

Happy Feet

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news. —Isaiah 52:7



We've all played the waiting game that can drive us mad. We interview for a job and wait to hear if we got it. We apply to a college and watch for the acceptance letter. We undergo a diagnostic test and await the doctor's call. Nothing is quite so exhilarating as the arrival of good news: "You got the job!" "You were accepted to college!" "The test came back negative!" We understand the joy of those who receive good news, for we have all been on the side of that fence where the news is not so good. This Christmas we once again anticipate the joyful news of our Savior's birth. This is not just an historical remembrance, but our anticipation of the many ways that Christ will once again be born into our lives. We look to one another to be herald angels who sing to us of Christ's coming anew. How beautiful, indeed, are the feet that fulfill such a blessed commission.

Activity: Help each child write a name for Jesus (e.g. Bread of Life, Good Shepherd) and place it in one of their shoes. After bedtime, add a treat to each shoe for the morning.

Prayer: Saving God, make us messengers of your gospel so that we may bring hope and joy to a world hungry for good news.

Hearing Our Mothers' Godly Voices

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

—*Luke 2:19*



On our daily calendar I recently noticed a telling line: “Sooner or later we all end up quoting our mothers.” My mother passed away many years ago, but I still hear her consoling voice on numerous occasions when I face some personal challenge or decision. The wisdom of our mothers is a quiet, gentle force that is transmitted mostly behind the scenes or behind closed doors. There are no news cameras vying to record the latest advice or consolation offered by a mother after her child fails a math test, faces a bully, or struggles with self-esteem. We celebrate Mary as one who became wise by treasuring and reflecting on her experiences. This wisdom was lovingly passed on to Jesus in everyday childhood encounters. As we hear the voice of Christ bidding us to forgive, trust, or love, no doubt we also hear the echo of his holy mother’s voice in those heavenly words.

Activity: Share stories of your mothers and grandmothers and the wisdom of faith and life that they imparted to you.

Prayer: Guiding Word, help us to treasure the wisdom of our Blessed Mother and all our mothers and grandmothers.

Holy Hospitality

Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels. —Hebrews 13:2



The Disney film, *Beauty and the Beast*, begins with a cautionary tale about judging by externals. A young prince turns away a beggar because of her haggard appearance. He fails to realize that she is actually a beautiful enchantress. Perhaps if the Holy Family had appeared more stately, they would not have been turned away from the inn. The holidays are a time for hospitality and visitation, like Mary visiting her kinswoman, Elizabeth: “Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” As we host holiday gatherings, one of the most familiar sounds is the doorbell ringing or friends knocking. Let these sounds call us to treat all our guests like royalty. By doing so, we welcome the ultimate guest, the Christ who lives in every person, the Lord of lords who came to us as a pauper in a stable. Let us not turn him away, but rather, “Let every heart prepare him room.”

Activity: Trace hearts on red construction paper and cut them out. Draw a door in the middle of each heart and cut it on three sides so it can open and close. Display them with doors open.

Prayer: Lord of love, our hearts are eager for your arrival. We strive to open our hearts to you and to all of God’s children.

A Statement Game

*While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed,
“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” —Acts 7:59*



Modern athletes forge their legacy in the pivotal contests that are often hailed as “statement games.” They speak of “leaving it all on the field” or a “gut check performance.” The key moments of these events are often punctuated by celebratory chest thumping and triumphant roars. St. Stephen delivers the ultimate statement game in a far more significant arena. As the first Christian martyr, Stephen gives his life without losing heart or faith. As he dies, he gives glory to God instead of celebrating himself. After witnessing their faith, believers do not thump their chests in triumph. Instead, they give of themselves humbly, recalling the practice of striking the breast over the heart three times during Mass. All Christian athletes who pay a loving price for their faith can take comfort in the words of St. Paul: “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness.”

Activity: Make a crown of construction paper or boughs and briefly crown each child. In grateful response, each child may gently strike their breast over the heart three times.

Prayer: Saving Lord, you came to save us by giving your all. Help us to keep faith and to give of ourselves from the heart.

Cars and Stars That Talk to Us

*We observed his star at its rising and have come
to pay him homage.—Matthew 2: 2*



The reputed male reluctance to ask for directions has provided fodder for many standup comics. These days, of course, GPS systems are featured in many cars. Now our vehicles talk to us and guide us quite specifically: “Turn right in one mile.” The Magi might have loved having such a device strapped to their camels, but instead they trusted more mystical forces to lead them to the Messiah. They had already learned not to put their trust in humans like Herod. Faith’s wisdom assured them that there are surer methods of finding God than human invention. Ancient mariners navigated by the stars out of necessity, but the Magi did it by choice. The feast of the Epiphany is a reminder that God sometimes guides us in mysterious ways, like pillars of fire, pillars of cloud, and stars rising in the East. Perhaps these mystical signs work because people of faith steer by the compass of the heart that always seems to point true north.

Activity: If it is a clear night, go outside after dark and do some star gazing for the brightest stars. Talk about times you needed guidance and where you got it.

Prayer: Loving Shepherd, let your light guide us to the places where you continue to be born in our lives and in our world.

Celebrating God's Coming in Sound

As you prepare for the birth of Christ, complement the visual symbols of Advent with the following simple rituals of sound.

Week 1: God's Wakeup Call: Advent is a season for spiritual reveille. St. Paul writes: "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." This week, set an alarm clock or alarm app to call the family to the advent wreath or dinner table. Turn off the alarm, then have a different member light one candle each night. If possible, play *Prepare Ye the Way* from the musical, *Godspell*.

Week 2: The Herald Angels: Advent begins and ends with angelic proclamations. The hymn, *Surely the Presence*, declares, "I can hear the brush of angels' wings." Gather at your wreath or table and light two candles. Give each family member a note to leave for a friend or classmate the next day (e.g. "Good job! "Have a great day!"). Sign each note, "secret angel." Brush each member's shoulder with a feather as a sign of commission.

Week 3: The Applause of Joy: Clapping is our default sign of appreciative affirmation. The psalmist bids God's people to audibly demonstrate their gratitude: "Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with joy." Each evening, recognize one family member with specific affirmations, then have the family applaud. Each day, also mention one of God's blessings to the family. Then light three candles and applaud the Lord.

Week 4: The Silent Night: Our Lord is born in a silent night, so advent bids us to make holy silence part of our daily prayer. Some of the most memorable Christmas hymns are actually lullabies for the Lord, like the ones parents sing to their children. Observe a moment of silence each evening, then light four candles. Listen to *Silent Night* or *Away in a Manger*. Those gifted or brave enough can sing a lullaby to one child each night.

Ring Christmas Bells

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory. —John 1:14*



Bells have historically provided a non-verbal means of spreading tidings of comfort and joy. We ring bells on wedding days, to signal the end of war, and to celebrate historic events. At the conclusion of the film, *Lincoln*, the president stands by his White House window braced in eager anticipation. He learns of the successful abolition of slavery, not by word of mouth, but by the miraculous sound of pealing bells pouring into the room. Both culture and faith bid us to welcome the news carried on the sound waves of bells. *The Carol of the Bells* proclaims, “Ring Christmas bells, merrily ring, tell all the world, Jesus is king.” *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* extols faith over doubt: “God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fall; the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.” Let us ring the bells of Christmas day to hail the birth of the Prince of Peace.

Activity: Gather as many bells as you can and ring them together as a sign of faith in the good news of God’s coming.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, may your precious and challenging gift of peace ring out in our hearts and in our world.