

Carmen's Family Advent Countdown

What you will need for great family fun (and significant learning) during Advent:

1. A quarter
2. Several varieties of grapes (or grape-flavored items)
3. Smiley sticker
4. A little "surprise" in a brown paper bag (it would be great if it were full of gummy fish!)
5. A birthday candle
6. Bell
7. "Goldfish" fish-shaped crackers
8. Watch "weather on the 8's" on the weather channel or go to weather.com and put in your zip code
9. Piece of a map (or you could do this devo in the car using your Nav system)
10. Sand dollar (the bigger the better)
11. Make homemade valentines out of Christmas paper or old Christmas cards
12. Place cards with each person's name on them around a table set with one extra chair (that place card should read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews")
13. Packet of salt or salt shaker
14. Sand (this is a great day to go to the beach!)
15. Flowers (silk)
16. Raisins
17. Seeds
18. A wrapped gift
19. A candy cane
20. Crumpled foil
21. Dove (a dove ornament will do)
22. Small scrap of wool
23. Picture of your child as a baby and their birth announcement (if you have one).

December 1 – Day of preparation! Advent is a season of preparation for the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. Today is a day of preparation for Advent – today is a good day to collect the "things" you will need for the first week of Advent. Today is also a good day to get out your Advent Calendar and hang it somewhere that everyone can see. Pick up an Advent Devotional booklet as a means of supplementing your own preparation for the coming of the Christ child. Talk with your child about what it means to be prepared for the arrival of a guest or a new baby. What are the all the things you would need to do to get ready? (If you're having guests this Christmas season, this is a good opportunity to plan for who is going to do what in your family to prepare for their arrival.)

December 2 - A quarter! That equals 25 cents. But 25 also stands for the number of days till Christmas, when God gave us His best present. Jesus told about one woman's gift and the way

she gave it. Read: Mark 12:41-44. (This is a great opportunity to teach your kids how to use the Bible. Teach them how to find the book title in the table of contents, turn to the beginning of that book, then find the chapter and finally the verses. Even if they can't read yet, they can find the numbers.)

Talk about what your family is going to "give" this Christmas (not what everyone is hoping to "get"). This is a good time to clean out "old" toys and to talk about giving gifts that don't "cost" anything: singing carols at a nursing home, sending Christmas cards to military service men, making cookies for the fire-fighters, giving hugs to everyone who comes to church.

December 3 – Let's have a grape tasting. Which one of these do you like best? Do you like the actual grape better than the grape (juice or gum or candy or popsicle or jam or raisin)? One of the things that they ate a lot of in Jesus' day was grapes. They also ate a lot of fish and olives and pita bread (it might be fun to serve all these items for dinner!). When Jesus performed his very first miracle he was at a party where the host ran out of wine – which is a drink that is made from grapes. Read: John 2:1-10.

Talk about parties that are planned and how we are expected to behave. What does it mean to be a good guest? What does it mean to be a good host and to show hospitality? Practice some "party appropriate" table manners as you sip your grape juice at the dinner table tonight and talk about how Jesus saved the best for last (like dessert!).

December 4 - Here's a smile! What makes you smile? What does a smile communicate? Do you smile when you feel sadness or when you feel joy? One of the songs that we sing at Christmas is "Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing." The coming of Jesus is described in Luke 2:10 as "good news of great joy for all people." What do you think that means? What brings you joy? (this is a good time to help older children distinguish between genuine joy and fleeting "happiness" – you could use Philippians 4:10-13).

December 5 – Put the brown paper in the middle of the table. Give everyone an opportunity to try to guess what's in it. Talk about surprises. What was the best surprise you ever received? Talk about a time that someone surprised you (with their presence or something that did not include a tangible "gift"). Jesus was always surprising people! The Bible is full of stories about how Jesus surprised people with his teaching, his perspective, his power and with the working of miracles. Remember the story of the wedding where he turned the water into wine? Weren't those people surprised?! Today's story is all about how surprising things can be when you're with Jesus. Read: Luke 5:4-7. Being with Jesus brings more blessings into our lives than we can count! Let's think of all the ways that we are blessed to be a part of God's family. Then, open the surprise bag of gummy fish!

December 6 - A birthday candle? As you know, we are getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birthday. What is your favorite birthday memory? Tell your kids about a birthday you

remember as a child. Look on the church prayer list and see whose birthdays are coming up soon. Is there someone you know? Could you pray for them, send them a card or give them a call? Hold up the candle and read Matthew 5:14-16 to learn what Jesus had to say about you and me and Light! Discuss how each of you can reflect or show God's light and love to others today.

Sing: "This little light of mine, I'm goin' to let it shine! (repeat)

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm goin' to let it shine! (repeat)

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

Won't let Satan (blow) it out! I'm goin' let it shine! (repeat)

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

December 7 – Ring the bell (use your doorbell if necessary—give each person a chance to ring the bell). Where have we seen or heard someone ringing a bell? (At church, the Salvation Army bell ringers in front of stores, maybe a bell choir). Ringing a bell is a good way of getting someone's attention, isn't it? You can really make some noise with this, can't you? Sometimes people are bothered by all the noise we make with our games and toys. (This is a good opportunity to do some instruction on wearing headphones or using the "silent" feature on games and toys). But all that noise would not have bothered a certain man--until he met Jesus. Read: Mark 7:31-37.

Let's really use our listening ears today and thank God for the good gift of hearing that He gave us as a blessing.

December 8 – Goldfish crackers: set them up so you can do a multiplication table with them. $2 \times 2 = 4$, $2 \times 3 = 6$, $2 \times 4 = 8$ should be enough to make the point. Two goldfish crackers don't fill you up – but when you start multiplying those fish, even just a few times, you get plenty! Today's story is about how Jesus made a lot out of just a little: Read: Matthew 14:13-21. Talk about how your family is going to make a lot out of a little this Christmas by asking God to take what you have and multiply it to His glory. Then, talk about all the "leftovers" that the disciples gathered at the end of the story. Talk about all the "leftovers" you have gathered over the years from the over abundance of God's blessings in your life. Remember the gifts you opened last Christmas? Where are they now? Are they buried under more recent blessings? Maybe it's time to gather up the leftovers and pass them along as blessings to others.

December 9 – Look at today's weather forecast (and the forecast in other places – maybe somewhere that it's snowing!) Weather is a wonderful thing! Talk about why it's cooler in the winter than the summer; talk about the places where it's snowing and the places that stay dark all day this time of year. What kinds of preparations do people in those places need to make? Jesus was always prepared to handle the weather! And because He was God, He could even control it! Read: Matthew 8:23-27

You and I cannot control the weather, but we can be prepared. Talk about weather forecasts and what we need to do to be prepared for rainy days or cold temperatures. Acknowledge to your kids that there are people who are not prepared because they don't have homes to live in or warm clothes to put on. Talk to your kids about ministries that help people in times of need. Maybe today would be a good day to add a few things to your shopping cart at the grocery for the local food pantry or put the money from a piggy-bank into the bucket in front of a store.

December 10 – What is this map of? (spend some time exploring the information on the map or plugging the address of the church and church friends into your car's Nav system).

In order to use a map, you have to know where you are and where you want to go. Then you chart a course and follow it turn by turn. If you don't have a map, or you don't follow the directions, what happens? (you get lost). Jesus said in Luke 19:10 that He came to seek and to save what was lost. Jesus told His disciples that He was the map they needed to follow in order to get to Heaven.

Read: John 14:1-6 Next time we're in the car we're going to look for one way signs. When you see one, start reciting this verse: "Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life! John 14:6"

December 11 – The legend of the sand dollar goes like this: "There's a lovely little legend that I would like to tell, of the birth and death of Jesus, found in this lowly shell. If you examine closely, you'll see that you find here, four nail holes and a fifth one, made by a Roman's spear. On one side the Easter lily, its center is the star, that appeared unto the shepherds and led them from afar. The Christmas Poinsettia etched on the other side, reminds us of His birthday, our happy Christmastide. Now break the center open, and here you will release, the five white doves awaiting, to spread Good Will and Peace. This simple little symbol, Christ left for you and me, to help us spread His Gospel, to all who want to see."

December 12 – Hearts remind us of love and valentines are little gifts that say "I love you" without using words at all! God sent us a great valentine when He sent Jesus. The Bible says that God is love and that those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. A right understanding of God's love helps us love one another. Jesus says that love that is a command, but love is also a gift, and love is the outward evidence that shows other people that we belong to God.

When Jesus was asked which of all God's commandments was the greatest, he responded by saying, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22)

He also said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13) So, we are commanded to love. But God is so good! He gives us the gift of love in ReconnectwithCarmen.com

order that we can keep the command to love! I Corinthians 13 describes the greatest gift of God, the gift of love: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

Then, it says in Galatians 5 that love is the first fruit, or the outward evidence to other people, that we belong to God. The Bible even says that other people will know we are Christians by our love! Let’s pray today that our family can show the love of God to others – as if we are God’s valentines sent with love to them.

December 13 – Find your name on one of the place cards at the table tonight. Oh, look, there’s an extra seat! What does it say on that place card? (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews)

That sounds like a wonderful title, doesn’t it? Well, the first time Jesus’ name appeared like that on a sign it was actually on the cross where he died. Open the bible to John 19:19 (if your kids are age appropriate, read John 19:17-30, the story of the crucifixion).

The story of Jesus’ death is very sad but that’s not the end of the story!

Because of what Jesus did on the cross, God put the name of Jesus above every other name. Turn to Philippians and read 2:1-11. For our family prayer before this meal, let’s get down on our knees just like it says in the Bible and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. “Holy God, we bow down before the name of Jesus. We confess that the name of Jesus is above every other name. God, we thank you for the baby Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and we thank you that He died on the cross and that He rose from the dead on Easter morning. Bless our family as we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. In His name we pray, Amen.”

December 14 - Ordinary salt. Yes, Jesus related salt to us and our behavior. He also gave us some advice. Read: Matthew 5:14 and Colossians 4:6. (Notice that He doesn't recommend pepper!).

December 15 - Don't try to eat this! It's sand. It reminds us that Jesus knows something about architecture, about buildings--and building lives. See His instructions: Matthew 7:24-29.

December 16 - Flowers are pretty, aren't they? Jesus used flowers to teach us a reassuring lesson. Read: Matthew 6:28-34.

December 17 - Raisins! Many children are given raisins instead of candy for a snack. That's because they are a health-promoting and delicious fruit. Jesus told us how we can produce good fruit. Read: John 15:1-5.

December 18 - Jesus told a story about seeds that man planted. Then He explained it, revealing its deep meaning. Read: Matthew 13:3-8 and Matthew 13:18-23.

December 19 - Christmas is just about a week away. There are already some gifts under our tree. Tonight we're going to wrap some gifts to give to others and we're going to talk about the greatest gift we could ever receive: the gift of God's love, wrapped up in the person of Jesus, and given to us on Christmas.

December 20 – Look at the candy cane, what do you see? (red, white, hard, shaped like a J)

A candymaker wanted to make a candy that would help us remember who Christmas is really about. So he made the Candy Cane. He began with a stick of pure white, hard candy.

- White to symbolize the virgin birth and sinless nature of Jesus.
- Hard candy to symbolize the solid rock, the foundation of the Church, and firmness of the promises of God.

The candymaker made the candy in the form of a "J" to represent the name of Jesus. When you turn it around you see that it also looks like a shepherd's staff reminding us of Jesus who is the "Good Shepherd" (Read John 10:11-18 or Psalm 23). The candymaker then included red stripes. He used three small stripes and a large red stripe to represent the suffering Christ endured at the end of his life.

December 21 - Try to smooth out this piece of aluminum foil and use it as a mirror. It's hard to see your reflection plainly, isn't it? Many circumstances are hard to understand, but someday everything will be clear. Read: 1 Corinthians 13:12.

December 22 - We've learned that the cross represents Christ, but do you know what the dove stands for? Read: Matthew 3:13-17.

December 23 - The threads that compose this fabric came from the wool of a sheep. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd. Do you know who His sheep are? Read: John 10:7-18.

December 24 – Using the picture of your child as a baby, tell them the story of their birth. Show them their birth announcement and recall the great joy that you experienced in sharing the good news of their birth with other people. If your Christmas will include relatives or friends this Christmas day, include them in the story-telling. Maybe your parents could tell your children about your birth! Then, turn the conversation to the birth announcement of Jesus. The story of Jesus' birth was announced by angels to shepherds and was "good news of great joy for all people." Take the time to read Luke 2:1-20 aloud as you enjoy the presence of Christ in the midst of all the presents. Merry Christmas!