

Why We Decorate



I have so many things to say about Christmas decorations that I could write a short book on the subject. But I will spare you that, and just try to sum up for now.

Making Connections

Some decorations have obvious or intuitive origins. For example, we put up lights to dispel the darkness of the approaching Winter Solstice, and the lights also connect us to the reading for Christmas Day, that a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. (*John 1:5*)

And then there are the many decorations that have pagan origins (like holly, ivy, and yule logs) which we have repurposed into Christian symbols. This is not unlike moving Jesus' birth to December in order to supplant pagan gods' feasts, even though the majority of scholars agree Jesus was more likely born in the spring.

But I think—given that this year will be unlike any year we've experienced—a good basic rule of thumb in all our holiday decorating might be to consider why we're decorating at all. It can be as simple as, "This pine tree smells nice," or as personal as, "My great grandparents brought this ornament with them when they immigrated in the 1870s." What I mean is, consider decorating this year with purpose and intention. Think about why you do what you do, and decorate with awareness and mindfulness.

Now, on to some specifics . . .

Advent Wreath

In my childhood home, we always put a wreath on the dining room table during Advent. And on many nights, after we ate, we would sing carols and have a short devotion. The basic makeup of the Advent Wreath is a circle of evergreens (to symbolize eternity in the circle, and continuous life in the greens) along with candles. Typically, there are five candles: 3 are blue or violet, one is pink or rose, and the center one is white. The main purpose of the candles is to mark the passage of time (which is why oil candles are not the best for this). As we move through Advent, we can see where we've been and where we're going. If you've never had an Advent Wreath in your house before, the circle and the greens are not so important as the passage of time. So, a good alternative might be to put four candles on your mantle or on a table, and just light a new one each week as you count the weeks until Christmas.

Christmas Creche

Sometimes called a manger, the creche is typically a stable setting, where we mix all the stories of Jesus' birth together. So, we often get the angels and shepherds from Luke, and the stable and wise men from Matthew in one compressed scene. And that's totally fine! The one thing I ask, as your priest, is that you wait to put Jesus in the manger until after sundown on Christmas Eve. Not because it's bad luck or something, but just as a little nod that we're still waiting during Advent.

Christmas Tree

This is the most notable decoration in our homes leading up to Christmas. There are many different explanations of how we came to drag a cut pine tree into our homes at this time of year, but let's skip over folklore for now, and just enjoy the absurdity of it all! Some people decorate their trees sparsely, with matching bulbs, and others go to town with tinsel and flashing lights. Whatever the tradition in your own home, I fully support whatever you choose to do. But referring back to what I said above, try to be mindful of how and why you decorate as you do. Is it because that's how you did it as a child? Is it because it's *not* how you did it as a child? What do you like (or not like) about having a tree in your home? Do you have favorite ornaments? How do you choose the space that will be set apart for this large adornment of holiday cheer?

Twelve Days of Christmas

Okay, here's the one thing I want to be sure to mention. From November 29th to December 24th, we are in the Advent season. Sure, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, but Christmas doesn't come until the sun sets on December 24th. *Then* we begin the twelve days of Christmas. (Perhaps you've heard a song about this stretch of days.) If you start counting Christmas as the first day, you will get to 12 on January 5th, and the next day is January 6th, which we call Epiphany, when the Magi arrive. Point being, no matter when you put up your decorations, I encourage you to try to leave them up throughout the Christmas Season, which means until January 6th, just to be sure you get those 12 drummers drumming, if nothing else.