

DRAFT



Part I: Readings, Reflections, and Menus for Advent





First Sunday of Advent

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Isaiah 9:2

Hope

Twice in my life I have had the privilege of being in the “Little Town of Bethlehem.” There, in Bethlehem, began the story of God’s entry into our world, our accounting of time, and our sense of hope for all that is yet to be.

During my first visit, despite the contemporary clamor of a noisy world, in such a holy place, I felt a need to almost tiptoe across Manger Square. Then, I experienced a real requirement to bow low at the Church of the Nativity, lest the venerable stones at the entrance exact a powerful blow to my head.

The group I was with made several starts and stops along the nave of the Church and then, carefully, descended the darkened steps, down, down, down into a circle of candlelight to the traditional place of Jesus’ birth. Visitors were respectful of the quiet holiness as the tour guides made their presentations. Then, I heard voices bringing life to the words of a carol known to many across God’s world, “...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The carolers were singing in English, Norwegian, German, Spanish, and probably many other languages. All were singing in hope.

Later, back again on the pavement of Manger Square, I saw young men and women in Israeli military uniforms rushing to catch buses home at the end of their day. Tank treads

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clattered in the background. From the minaret, I could hear the wail of the mu'ezzin calling out the adhan, the Islamic summons to worship. And again, amid the cacophony, I remembered the words from the carol, "...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

*How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.*

("O Little Town of Bethlehem," 3rd Stanza, from The United Methodist Hymnal, Phillips Brooks, 1835-1893)



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The Advent Wreath

Since the time of Protestant reformer Martin Luther people in many churches and homes have used Advent wreaths to help mark the passage of the four weeks of Advent in the liturgical, or church, calendar. The wreath, which is shaped in a circle to symbolize the eternity of God, often is made from evergreen branches. Four candles, one for each week, represent the gifts or virtues that Jesus brings: hope, love, joy, and peace. The order in which churches light the candles varies, and some churches have different names for the candles. For example, some churches light the first candle as a symbol of expectation, the second for hope, the third for joy, and the fourth for purity. Some churches use a different color for one candle—sometimes for joy and sometimes for love, to highlight their importance. Many Advent wreaths also include a fifth, usually white, candle in the center. The fifth, or Christ Candle, traditionally is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world. The Advent Wreath--whether elaborate or simple--can be a helpful way to focus on the days of preparation as we move toward Christmas.



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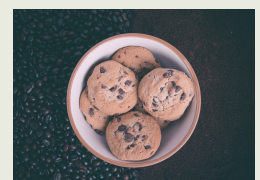


A Note About the Menus for Advent

Hungriness. That's what Advent is about. So, while you prepare your longing, yearning heart for the coming of the Christ child, we'd like to help you prepare your kitchen for the season so that you may nourish your hungry body. Americans in December traditionally focus more than most other times of the year on cooking, baking, and readying our homes to share special foods and drinks with our friends and family. We look forward to holiday cheer and glorious food.

Nonetheless, many of us also dread the work, expense, and calories involved. This year let's resolve to nix the struggle. It isn't necessary. After all, in America haven't we, in November, just offered our thanks for our nation's bounty and God's presence and grace in our lives in times of plenty and of want? Instead of focusing our Advent preparations in the kitchen and home on achieving gastronomic and decorating perfection—a recipe for emotional and economic distress—can we instead concentrate on preparing foods that are delectable and look good—even elegant—but that nourish and don't break our patience or bank accounts?

The kitchen and home should be places of coziness and caring. For that, you won't need granite countertops, fine china, expensive prime rib, and pricey wines. You will need a bit of time for preparations. Maybe foregoing frantic trips to the malls—oh, horrors! oh, joy!—will yield some extra hours to ready your kitchen and, if you like, prepare some simple food gifts.





So, take a look at the menu ideas, tips, and recipes in the coming pages and find something new to try. Perhaps a few (or more) of the menus will appeal to you. Or maybe you'll want to try some of the other recipes included in Part II. Mix, match, and substitute as you like, depending on your time, family, budget, and how many leftovers you already have in your refrigerator. The menus are suggestions to help you ease your planning. We doubt you will want to prepare each menu. Don't worry. The kitchen police will not arrive to arrest you if you don't proceed with all the menus or prepare them in the order given. In fact, the menus and recipes will be just as good if you turn to them in January or July instead of December. Cook as an expression of your love and care for others. Your family and guests can enjoy scrumptious food without the ingredients being expensive, "froufrou," artery hardening, or diet busting (well, sometimes, maybe a little...).

The stable wasn't a perfect venue for a feast. And I really doubt that Mary and Joseph had a four-star, gourmet meal at that first Christmas so many years ago. Nonetheless, I am certain that the stable was warm and full of love. Your kitchen can be, too.





in the Kitchen, First Sunday in Advent

What to cook for the first Sunday of Advent? How about a special dinner to celebrate the lighting of the first Advent candle?

Carrot-Date Salad

Cranberry-Rhubarb Pork Cutlets

Butternut Squash Bake With Cranberry Crumble

Broccoli

Advent Cake

The carrot-date salad is unusual. It has sweetness from carrots and dates, but it also has a tart zing from Greek yogurt. The pork cutlets are quick to cook, and they look lovely with the ruby-colored cranberry-rhubarb sauce. The butternut squash bake starts with frozen squash and gets a crunchy oat topping that makes it something extraordinary. Broccoli goes nicely with the pork cutlets and squash. Just zap the broccoli in the microwave. Fresh is great, but the frozen broccoli from a package probably is less expensive and just fine. Besides, the frozen stuff will be more nutritious than the “fresh” broccoli that’s been parked on the grocery store shelf for days. The Advent cake is special. It includes lots of tasty things that are good for you and that meld together into a fragrant, spicy, densely moist dessert. Despite its magnificence, the cake isn’t expensive and can be stirred up without hauling out the mixer. And you don’t need to frost it. It’s fine “as is” or, if you want to be fancy, dusted with a bit of powdered sugar. I prefer it plain, with a scoop of low fat eggnog ice cream nestled alongside. Yum!





Carrot-Date Salad - Serves 8

The carrots (use a food processor to shred them) and dates add sweetness to this salad, while the yogurt adds tang. You can add the honey, as you like, for a touch more sweetness, but try the salad first without it and then adjust the amount of honey you use to your taste. Remember, though, that, as the salad sits, the dates will soften and add their natural sugars to the mixture.

*16 ounces of carrots, cleaned, trimmed, and shredded**

1 cup of chopped dates

1 cup of plain, fat-free Greek yogurt

1 teaspoon of cinnamon

¼ cup of low-fat mayonnaise

1-2 tablespoons of honey (optional)

Mix all the ingredients and refrigerate the salad for at least a couple of hours before serving.

**Beware of the pre-shredded, packaged carrots. They are time-savers, but the carrots often are dry and not very good. The packages also are expensive compared to shredding your own carrots.*





Cranberry-Rhubarb Pork Cutlets – Serves 4+

This is a beautiful dish for the season with its tangy-sweet cranberry-rhubarb sauce. The cutlets are fast to prepare and fairly low in fat and calories. If you'd like, you can make the easy sauce ahead and refrigerate it until you're ready to brown the pork cutlets. Just heat the sauce in the microwave until warm and then add it to the pan with the browned cutlets. Also, if you'd rather not use pork, substitute very thin turkey cutlets. I've made the recipe with both, and the dish is excellent either way.

1 teaspoon + 1 tablespoon of canola oil, divided

½ medium onion, chopped

*2 cups of sliced fresh or frozen rhubarb (thawed and drained, if frozen)**

1/3 cup of dried cranberries

1/3 cup of dark brown sugar

1 tablespoon of cider vinegar

1 teaspoon of orange zest

¼ teaspoon of cinnamon

1/8 teaspoon of ground ginger

¼ teaspoon of pepper

¼ teaspoon of salt

Pork (or turkey) cutlets (16-24 ounces), sliced very thin (about ¼ inch thick)

Heat a teaspoon of oil in a saucepan over medium heat. When the pan and oil are hot, add the onion and cook it about five minutes until it begins to soften. Add the rhubarb, cranberries, brown sugar, vinegar, orange zest, cinnamon, and ginger. Bring everything to a boil, stir, and reduce the heat to a simmer. Cook the mixture for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the rhubarb softens and begins breaking down. Remove the pan from the heat.



In a non-stick skillet, heat the remaining tablespoon of oil over medium-high heat. Add the cutlets (in batches, if necessary to avoid crowding the pan) and sprinkle them with the salt and pepper. Cook the cutlets for just a minute or 2 until browned a bit on the bottom. Flip the cutlets and cook them for a couple of minutes more. They should cook very quickly in the hot pan. Resist the urge to cook the cutlets longer, or they will be tough. Remove the cutlets from the heat and let them sit for a couple of minutes. Pour the warm sauce over the cutlets before serving them.

**Can't find rhubarb at the market? Sometimes, I can't either, or it's prohibitively expensive! I will not pay \$4 per pound for it, even though I like rhubarb! If you need a substitute, use 2 cups of fresh or frozen cranberries instead of the rhubarb and proceed with the recipe. Obviously, you'll have cranberry pork cutlets, rather than the cranberry-rhubarb version. Nonetheless, the recipe will be good!*





Butternut Squash Bake With Cranberry Crumble – Serves 4-6

This isn't a dessert, but it certainly is good. The squash is naturally sweet, and a touch of warm spice and some orange juice brings out its flavor. The topping of oats, chopped cranberries, and a bit of brown sugar provides a crunchy-sweet-tart foil for the creamy squash. Microwaving the squash and then adding the topping and baking the casserole saves time and hassle.

2 16-ounce packages of frozen butternut squash cubes

2 tablespoons of orange juice

¼ teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon of pumpkin pie spice (or cinnamon)

Crumble

2 tablespoons of dark brown sugar

1 cup of oats

¼ cup of chopped cranberries

2 tablespoons of canola oil

Cook the squash as directed on the package until just tender. Stir in the orange juice, the salt, and pumpkin pie spice. Mix all the crumble ingredients well until some of the pieces cling together in pea-size pieces. Sprinkle the crumble over the squash. Bake the squash for about 20 minutes or until the topping is bubbly and golden.



Advent Cake – Serves 12-15

This is a dense cake, full of nutritious and tasty ingredients. The cake gets some sweetness from a combination of white and brown sugars but also is rich in natural sweeteners—including applesauce, dried cranberries, and golden raisins. The mashed sweet potato adds a deeper flavor as well as moisture, and a ground orange complements the sweet potato and warm spices in the cake. Make sure you remove the seeds (which are bitter) before you grind the remainder of the whole orange in the food processor or blender. You can add the glaze or not. I like the cake plain—warm with ice cream—but the glaze will add more sweetness and moisture to the cake as well as boost the orange flavor.

1/2 cup of sugar

1/2 cup of dark brown sugar

1/2 cup of canola oil

2 eggs

1/2 cup of applesauce

1 cup of mashed sweet potato

1-2 oranges, quartered, seeds removed, and ground in a blender or food processor (you need about 1 cup of ground orange)

1 teaspoon of vanilla extract

1/2 cup of dried cranberries

1/2 cup of golden raisins

1 cup of flour

1 cup of white whole-wheat flour

1 teaspoon of baking soda

1/2 teaspoon of baking powder

1/2 teaspoon of salt

1 teaspoon of cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon of ginger





¼ teaspoon of cloves

¼ teaspoon of allspice

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and coat a tube or 10-inch bundt pan with nonstick cooking spray. In a large bowl, combine the sugar, canola oil, and eggs and whisk them well. Add the applesauce, sweet potato, ground orange, and vanilla extract, stirring well to combine the ingredients. Mix together and add to the wet ingredients the flours, baking soda, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and allspice. Stir just until everything is moistened and then pour the batter into the tube pan. Bake the cake for 45-60 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean or with a few crumbs clinging to it. Let the cake cool for 10-15 minutes before trying to remove it from the pan. While the cake is warm, add the glaze if you'd like.

Glaze (Optional)

1 cup of confectioners' sugar

¼ cup of orange juice

1 teaspoon of butter

Combine all the ingredients in a small bowl and heat them in the microwave for 30-45 seconds until the mixture is hot and the butter has melted. Stir the glaze until it's smooth and pour it slowly over the warm cake. To avoid having the glaze ooze over the side of your cake plate or dish, you may need to pour on only half of the glaze, wait a few minutes to let the cake absorb some of the glaze, and then pour on the other half.



December 1

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The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jeremiah 33: 14-17

Welcome to Advent. This is the beginning of the Christian calendar year. Advent starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and is a time of preparation, of expectant waiting, of longing for the coming of the Messiah.

The days will seem unending for children but pass ever so quickly for adults.

We hope the thoughts and words in this book will help you, as you move through the days of Advent with your family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, to slow down and contemplate with a renewed sense of wonder and yearning God's entry into the world. Advent is a time to think, and even to say, "This is awesome!"

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free,
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.*





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*Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

*By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.*

(The United Methodist Hymnal, Charles Wesley, 1707-1788)

