



JANKY LITURGICAL

Preserving Our Culture and Sanity in Advent

Marcia and I love liturgical living. We especially love the rhythms of the Church calendar with its feasts and seasons and the opportunity it gives us to enter into different aspects of the mystery of God's becoming a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

But as two women who are working full-time, managing households, and trying to keep together some sort of social life, we're usually too exhausted at the end of the day to make something handcrafted for each holiday. In fact, we're far more likely to know the upcoming Starbucks seasonal drink than whatever saint's feast day is coming next.

At my house, for example, there is a beautiful wrought-iron Advent wreath formed in a Celtic knot to pay tribute to my Irish heritage. But last year those lovingly crafted candleholders were filled with the following: one half-used purple candle from the previous Advent; a pristine pink candle that I found in a box full of theology books from college; one of the kids' baptismal candles; and one random white taper that matched the size of the holder. And on St. Nicholas Day—an important festival for my husband Eric's Italian family—I definitely filled the kids' shoes with leftover Halloween candy.

Marcia approaches things a bit differently. When she was managing a residence licensed by the Department of Children and Family Services, candles that could possibly set fire to the house were most definitely out of the question. As a family teacher at a residential school, she didn't always have Catholic youth in the house, so it would have been difficult to make liturgical celebrations a household thing. So for her, celebrating Advent is usually a personal endeavor, done begrudgingly. Marcia's one nod to Advent celebrations entails buying a dress in rose hue every couple of years to wear on Gaudete Sunday. Because on Gaudete Sunday, we wear pink (taking a cue from *Mean Girls* queen bee Regina George—it's important to stay in her good graces, after all). This rather slapdash way of celebrating the liturgical year is what we like to call "janky liturgical."

Normally, *calling* something "janky" is not complimentary. It means that thing probably needs to be fixed or replaced. But *using* something janky means you are making do with what you have and making it work for you. We all have janky things in our lives that are enough to get by for now.

Janky liturgical is messed up and haphazard. It's a little bit fancy and a lot bit frantic. It's making do with what we have so we can do something to mark the Church year because we want to share our faith with others, passing on the traditions that bring our Catholic faith into our homes and our everyday life. It's something we value because we love Jesus and we love liturgy. We're huge fans of the people who make beautiful things to celebrate feasts and seasons. But we're really just not good at crafts. So we love janky liturgical living: anyone can do it. We use what we have on hand and work within our own skill sets to make it work.

Forgot it was Mardi Gras? Buy a sheet cake from the grocery store, stick a plastic toy baby in the middle, hit it with a few sprinkles, and call it a king cake, like I did.

It will look ridiculous. Guests will likely give the cake a hefty dose of side-eye. Kids will complain about how the baby made their piece too crumbly and ask a million questions like, "Why

did you steal my baby doll?” or “If I am the Mardi Gras king, can I make Dad clean my room this week?”

But it also provides an opportunity to explain the tradition, why it’s important, and what it means, without feeling as if we’re going crazy trying to do it all. It’s messy, but it’s also a moment for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

By focusing on doing something rather than the perfect thing, we give ourselves space to be human. By doing something rather than nothing, we also demonstrate to our family and friends that these special days matter to us and that they have meaning beyond an ordinary day of the year. By marking the days, we make the choice to pass on our faith, traditions, and culture in some way, shape, or form. We create opportunities to open up the mystery of the liturgical year to others, especially to the next generation, and to bring our culture and unique personalities to living our faith in our everyday lives.

Shannon’s Story

Advent is my favorite liturgical season. I even got married during Advent because I love it so much. The undercurrents of the season—light, hope, anticipation, watchfulness, waiting—speak to the yearning I feel every December as the days shorten. Preparing for Christmas, I delight in the rich traditions that help us delve more fully into the meaning of the Incarnation.

One of my favorite Advent traditions is the Jesse Tree. As a young child in a Catholic elementary school, I gravitated to the tree where the principal hung ornaments representing important moments and figures in salvation history leading up to the birth of Christ. My eyes would widen as I looked at King David’s lyre, Noah’s rainbow, and Jacob’s ladder. While I didn’t totally understand the stories, the visual representation helped me remember them better.

Every day beginning on December 1, a new ornament would appear, a new story would be read, and I would trace its path up

the tree toward the place where the ornament representing Jesus would eventually sit. Day by day, I saw the arc of God's work in history make its way closer and closer to Jesus, the One who fully reveals its meaning.

Of course, at age six I didn't really understand that this was what the Jesse Tree was teaching me. But the tradition planted a seed in my heart and in my memory, waiting to bear fruit in its own time.

Now let's fast-forward my story to when I was a twenty-nine-year-old mother of three kids, ages six, three, and two. We were living in a small town in rural Indiana, and to get to the grocery store I had to drive about twenty minutes to the next town north. The most direct route caused us to pass a house flying a Confederate flag and displaying racially charged memorabilia on the front lawn. My shoulders tensed every time it came into view, while I prayed that I would never have to stop at the nearby train tracks for any reason.

Shortly after my oldest son began attending first grade at the local public school, I drove by this house again and decided it was time for our family to have "the talk" about racism. Not because my children are dark-skinned—I have a lighter skin tone and my husband is both German and Italian, so our children look very European. They understand that they have a Black grandfather; that their family is African American and participates in Black culture; even that our ancestors were brought here as part of the slave trade. And though they have largely been spared it themselves, I wanted them to be aware of the discrimination that people with dark skin continue to experience in their everyday lives.

A BLACK HISTORY PRIMER

“ONE DROP” LAWS

The impact of one's skin tone has a long, complicated history for Americans of African descent, dating back to the slave codes enacted in the colonial period. At the time the first enslaved Africans were brought to Virginia in 1619, Africans were treated like other indentured servants from Europe. After a certain period of service or for a certain amount of money, they would be considered free citizens in the colonies. They were also allowed to bring complaints against their masters to the courts if they felt they were being unjustly treated.

This changed in 1705 when the Virginia General Assembly passed the *Act Concerning Servants and Slaves*. The act stated that any person who was not Christian in their native land was enslaved for the entirety of their life unless they were manumitted by their masters, and that any children born to an enslaved woman kept her status for their lifetime. Slaveholders no longer faced any legal culpability for the methods used to punish the enslaved, either, including punishment by death.

Similar laws were passed throughout the Southern colonies, codifying the legal status of multiracial people as “black” and allowing their continued enslavement no matter what they looked like, or whether they had European ancestry. The language usually stated that a person was to be classified as a slave if they had “even one drop of Black blood.” It was a way to prevent descendants of African people from gaining power or wealth, or even reclaiming their freedom.

The “one drop” language is still used today by groups that hold racist and white supremacist views, and who use symbols like the Confederate flag and caricatures of African Americans and Hispanic Americans to degrade and intimidate Black and

Brown people—not unlike the treatment that the Jews received in Nazi Germany.

Americans of African descent know that skin color doesn't automatically protect a person from intimidation, discrimination, or harm. This is why, for our families, it is a matter of survival to make our children aware of these attitudes and symbols as they make their way through the world.

When Eric and I sat down to discuss the house flying the Confederate flag with our son, I had a clear outline in my head of how the conversation would flow. We would talk about the flag and what it stood for, about words for Black people that were never to be used, and about the importance of caring for people of every background.

I began to explain to my son about some of the racist language people used for people of African descent. He seemed to follow what I was saying, though he was slightly confused about why I wanted to tell him about it. When I started to say what he should do if he ever heard anyone using racially charged insults, he turned quizzically to me. “But why would they say things like that to me, Mom?”

Before I could respond, my husband jumped in. “Because you’re Black.”

My son shot Eric a look of complete confusion. He rapidly looked down at his very light olive skin, then looked back at Eric as if he had two heads.

“Well, Grandpa is Black,” Eric continued, “so you’re Black.”

“But my skin is white!” our son replied, as if his father had suddenly lost his mind or perhaps his ability to see color.

I slapped my palm to my forehead and laughed. “What Dad means is that your family is African American, buddy. That our ancestors came from Africa and they were slaves.” Looking

pointedly at my husband, I added, “I would have said that we are people of African descent.”

Eric shrugged playfully, feigning bewilderment.

“Well, I knew that!” my son replied. “Is that why people would say mean things to me?”

“Yes, it is,” Eric replied, going on to discuss what to do if any situation should come up.

When our son went back to playing with his siblings, I shook my head at my husband in mocking chastisement, and he responded with a good-natured grin.

“Maybe next time leave the Black stuff to me, white man,” I said, winking.

This story illustrates how important it is for Eric and me to be intentional about how we teach our children. It shows why passing on our traditions requires work and deliberate effort. The way we talk to our children—especially the stories that we tell about who our family is—is an important way to preserve and pass along the traditions of our cultures to them. In our house, we believe it’s extremely important to work at preserving and honoring our cultures.

How else will they know their African American (or German, or Irish, or Italian) culture unless I choose to pass it on to them? So we make a special effort to expose them to Black history as well as African American food, music, books, and movies. We spend time in predominantly Black neighborhoods, at Black events, and in Black spaces so they can see what my culture is like and feel comfortable within it. Even if they will be seen as white, they can still be proud to be African Americans and to lift up the culture for future generations. I teach them these things so that they know who they are and where they came from.

The same can be said about our Catholic faith. Traditions have to be passed on. The stories we tell from scripture, the saints, and our own lives are what bring the living history of the People of

God into the next generation. This is why every Advent our family puts up a Jesse Tree.

It all started one Sunday morning after religious education class. My children, who attend public schools, were trying to tell me what they had learned about the faith that day when it hit me that they really didn't know the Bible that well. Not, like, memorizing passages from Paul's letters and reciting them, but simple stories about Creation, Noah's ark, Joseph's coat, and the Exodus. Even though we went to Mass every week and were involved at our church, something wasn't sticking. They didn't have Catholicism woven into their school day like I did.

I knew we had to do something to help them, and suddenly that seed blossomed: the Jesse Tree. Those stories that had captivated me were right there, waiting to be learned.

So now, every Advent, we pull out our Jesse Tree ornaments and hang them. (I bought the ornaments online. I didn't make them. And half of them have crayon scribbles on them now . . . janky liturgical.) We read the scripture passage related to each story. (Or sometimes I paraphrase it because the kids are really squirmy and think the Bible is boring . . . janky liturgical.) Sometimes, we even talk about where they see God in the story. (Or everyone starts wrestling and we pretend it's a reenactment of Jacob wrestling with God . . . janky liturgical.)

We are not very good at liturgical living at my house. We have to work at it. Most days we're so tired we'd rather forget it. My four young kids run through the house with reckless abandon, never pick up their clothes from the floor, and complain on their way to religious education each week. I've accidentally fed everyone chicken nuggets on a Friday in Lent and rolled my eyes in frustration at the priest who gave a thirty-minute homily while my toddler screamed bloody murder in the cry room. I'm a normal Catholic mom who sometimes wonders if my kids' baptisms took the first time.

But unless Eric and I do something to pass on our traditions and our faith, our kids won't absorb it from the world. We can't take for granted that they'll know Jesus if we don't invite them to meet Jesus. If we want them to see what discipleship looks like—to feel comfortable in it—then they have to see us trying to be disciples. They will only know what it means to be Christian if we teach them who they are and to whom they belong.

So—even if it means we're stumbling out of the car in mismatched sweatpants to get to Ash Wednesday Mass on time—we do our best to expose them to faith traditions, to share what our own faith means to us. Janky liturgical works for us because it gives the Holy Spirit room to work in our house.

And here's the thing: the Holy Spirit doesn't care if your Advent wreath is made from four tiny birthday candles you found at the bottom of a drawer. The Spirit will come as long as you make room.

Marcia's Story

Unlike Shannon, I don't consider Advent my favorite season. Since I wasn't raised Catholic, I didn't celebrate Advent growing up. It wasn't until I encountered the bombastic celebration of the liturgical seasons during my seventh-grade year at St. Gertrude's School that I discovered there was more to Advent than just buying presents and making treats for Christmas.

The Advents of my childhood revolved around church. My mom was the head of our Sunday school's entertainment committee. This meant that she was in charge of preparing for all of the holidays and organizing all of the social activities. As her children, my sisters and I were “volun-told” to help her. She worked hard, pulled off some great events, and managed to break only a *few* child-labor laws in the process.

I spent the weeks before Christmas learning lines for a Christmas pageant, attending choir rehearsal, or doing whatever else I had to do to aid my mom in service of our church. My baby sister

Joey had it easy. She was the angel every year. I mean, sure, she was adorable, but I think it had more to do with the fact that my family owned the costume than her precociousness. So, as long as she could fit in it, the gig was hers. Every year when December hit, our house would ring out in a cacophony of disjointed Christmas tidings, punctuated by a shrill, “Fear not, Mary!”

Advent was also a time of stress and struggle for my family. My sisters, mom, and I were often reminded of what we didn’t have and what we couldn’t get. My sisters and I had absent fathers; Mom was our sole provider. Advent was sometimes a period when we had to go without. Even though we were active making magic happen for our church community, we never let on that, after the Christmas pageant wrapped up, we would pack up the car (angel costume included!) and drive home across town in a car with no heat, to arrive at a house that might not have heat either. Or electricity. Or food. There were also times when we didn’t actually have a place to call home.

As I grew older, I came to realize that my mom’s added stress during this season came from trying to figure out how to provide a good Christmas for us on top of just needing to provide. In eighth grade I started volunteering at the parish food pantry. Other classmates were there to complete service hours for Confirmation preparation, and I decided to join them. I learned that most of the volunteers were also clients, and that they were able to take a bag of food home after a shift. From then on I volunteered as often as I could through my senior year in high school, every time bringing home a bag of groceries to help my mother provide for our family.

At sixteen, I stopped giving my mom a Christmas list. It was hard to watch her work for years while barely managing to make ends meet. Seeing her struggle even more to make Christmas happen was even harder. I remember observing my mom that Christmas as my sisters opened their gifts, wrapping paper flying around them. Mom looked exhausted, even though her eyes