

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Family. That's the common denominator for me. When I'm thinking about Christmas traditions, they all revolve around family. Close family. Extended family. Church family. School family. Work family. Friends and neighbors who have become family. From that first night in Bethlehem, celebrating Jesus' birth with others has been a central part of the event. The angels and shepherds were overwhelmed with the joy that Jesus' arrival heralded, and they celebrated together. Come along this month with Jonathan Bourman and Melissa Anne Kreuser and see how their families celebrate that Christmas joy together.

—Nicole Balza

WHAT CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS DO YOU CHERISH IN YOUR FAMILY?

CHRISTMAS STARTS for us the day after Thanksgiving. I crawl up into the attic and pull down all the boxes with all the decorations. My wife whips out her phone and cranks up her Christmas playlist. Then we put everything out. In the background, somewhere, a song plays, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." And that's because it is.

Sunday night comes quickly. We turn the lights off. Our daughter strikes the match. We smell a waft of phosphorus and watch an arm reach toward the wick with the flame. The first candle on the Advent wreath gets lit—the light glimmers in our eyes. I read the prophecies. The family reflects on them and prays for Christ to come. And then, likely as not,

if you could look in on us afterward, you'd see us laughing. Our hopes make humor possible. Also, *Elf* is on TV.

Then, Jesus' arrival turns Christmas anticipation into celebration. You can tell because the outfits are laid out. The curling iron is by the mirror. Also, the presents are all carefully wrapped under the tree. Off we go to church for Christmas worship. We linger there. Then we come home. Special food comes out. We light the center candle of the Advent wreath and read John chapter 1. Then we open our presents and top them off with stocking stuffers.

But here's the truth. At the Bourman house, we do Christmas like an ancient Jewish wedding. It just



The Bourmans "do Christmas like an ancient Jewish wedding—it just keeps going." Pictured are Jon Bourman skiing with his daughter and Melanie Bourman with their twin sons last Christmas.



keeps going. Some of that is through our nightly devotional ritual. We light the candles on the wreath and do Christmas until Epiphany. The rest of it happens because of a belief we have. There are few better ways to celebrate the incarnation than to be together. We seize the quieter days after Christmas Day for moments like that.

Think of us this Dec. 27. My daughter and I may be on a ski lift somewhere, our breath hanging in the air and light dancing off the snow. To call what we do

skiing would be to miss the point. It's the spiritual talks we have along the way that we value the most. There, skiing is transcended. Because what sparkles is so much more than the snow. It's her eyes and my heart all because Jesus is born, now in us too.



Jonathan Bourman and his wife, Melanie, are the parents of a daughter and two sons. They live in Mankato, Minnesota, where he serves as pastor at St. Mark.

THERE'S SOMETHING I strongly dislike about Christmas. And it's not fruitcake. It's that it ends.

I remember emotionally embracing our fresh balsam, standing sentinel in front of our large picture window in the cozy living room of my childhood home—so cozy, in fact, that setting up the tree necessitated the removal of several pieces of furniture for the three-week period of the tree's existence in our house.

I also distinctly recall dreading the day we would have to take the tree down, my mom's utterances of "It's getting so dry" or "I guess it's about time" signaling the approaching day of its removal. She disliked its disappearance just as much as I did and, as a result, typically put it off as long as possible.

I can't say much has changed for me. I absolutely love basking in the warm glow of the tree on those chilly Advent evenings, transporting me back to those childhood days as the lights twinkle and gleam.

And now that I have my own children who have fully inherited their grandmother and mom's sentimental side, they too dread the day our tree gets banished to the curb.

So we've adopted what we like to call a "last night" ritual of sorts.

It was back when my twin girls were just four years old, wide eyes brimming with tears as I told them we'd be undertaking the arduous task of removing ornaments, packing away lights, and ultimately ridding our house of the needle-dropping tree the following day. Wanting to soften the blow and honor the emotions they felt, I offered a solution: "What about a living room slumber party?"

And so that night, my girls with their wispy curls and pitter-pattering feet made their way down the stairs, arms laden with pillows, blankets, and more than a few stuffies. I set up sleeping bags, and we settled in, leaving only the Christmas tree's lights on.

Each year this tradition gets more and more difficult to carry out as our family grows both in number and size.



The Kreuser family loves "basking in the warm glow of the tree on chilly Advent evenings." Pictured are the Kreuser children enjoying their tree over the years.

My girls, now teenagers, don't fit quite as nicely on the living room floor next to their ten-year-old brothers as they once did. When Dad decides to join, his snoring typically sends him back to bed earlier than the rest of us. The extraneous light creeping in from the windows and the unsupportive couch cushions make it difficult for me to get any real rest. Truth be told, no one involved really gets much sleep. But let's be honest: Sleeping really isn't the main objective.

But each "last night," as I lie there in the glow, surrounded by the children God has entrusted to me, I smile, despite feeling a little melancholy. For I know that the serenity of this night, the twinkling of these lights, and the coziness of this room will soon fade, but the reason we celebrate never will, and all of it will pale in comparison to the glory that awaits us.



Melissa Anne Kreuser and her husband, Michael, are raising two sets of identical twins. The family attends Morning Star, Jackson, Wisconsin.

Interested in more? Visit forwardinchrist.net/parents for more parenting resources, including articles, podcasts, and videos.

