



AROUND
the CIRCLE
FAMILY
ACTIVITY
GUIDE

A GUIDE TO CELEBRATING
THE CHURCH YEAR AT HOME

BY LAURA ALARY

INTRODUCING AROUND THE CIRCLE

Around the Circle arose from my own experience of observing the church year with my three children. When my son was a baby I made him a wordless fabric book which I used to teach him the colors, symbols, and stories of the Christian year. As the book travelled back and forth to church with us, it helped connect what he was seeing and hearing there with what we were doing at home to celebrate these special times. Many years later, it occurred to me that a similar kind of book, with simple text, might be helpful to other families.

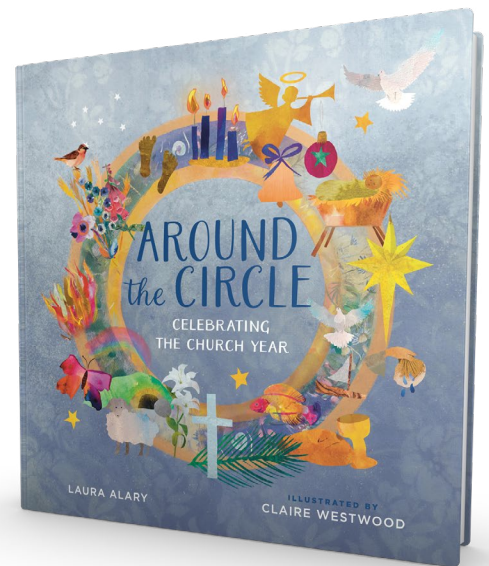
Around the Circle does not go into detail about any particular season. Rather, it presents a big picture of the cyclical path we travel together. It can be read at any time of year but is especially useful at the start of each new season to give children a sense of “where we are” (or “when we are”) and where we are heading next. As children get older they can retell and expand on the stories that go with the illustrations.

Because the origins of this book are so personal, this guide is too. What follows are some activities that have been meaningful to my own family over the years. If you are looking for more, there are many resources in print and online. I recommend the *Faithful Families* series of books by Traci Smith. As your children get older, you might also appreciate my own *Circle of Wonder* series: *Look! A Child’s Guide to Advent and Christmas*, *Make Room: A Child’s Guide to Lent and Easter*, *Rise: A Child’s Guide to Eastertide*, and *Breathe: A Child’s Guide to Ascension, Pentecost, and the Growing Time* (all from Paraclete Press).

WHY CELEBRATE THE CHURCH YEAR AT HOME?

Before I share our traditions, here are a few thoughts about why you might want to celebrate the church year at home.

- **The church year is based on the story of Jesus.** As we follow the circle, we are also following Jesus and bringing our lives into alignment with his story. Along the way, we think deeply about who we are and how we want to be in the world. With very young children, this can be as simple as, “Jesus welcomed people, so we do too” or “Jesus spent time with God, so we do too.”
- **The church year invites continual growth.** Year after year, we tell the same stories and repeat the same traditions, but discover that because we have changed, there are always new meanings to discover. In this way we come to know that faith is something that matures and deepens over time. We grow into it, not out of it.



- **The church year is rhythmic and repetitive.** This makes it both an excellent teaching tool, and very soothing—especially for young children. There is reassurance in knowing what comes next, and pleasure in anticipating favourite traditions associated with special times.

- **The church year makes room for a wide range of emotions.** The story of Jesus is filled with anticipation, joy, and comfort, but also fear, anger, disappointment, and grief. Encountering these emotions as we travel through the stories reassures us that there is room for them in the Church and in Christian life.

Spending time with the circle of the church year encourages children to be emotionally honest; it teaches them lament as well as celebration; it lets them know that God welcomes all their feelings and is present in all circumstances.

- **The church year is embodied and multisensory.** It uses sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste to draw us more deeply into the story of Jesus. This is especially important for young children, whose imaginations are often engaged through their bodies. But we all benefit from a more fully embodied faith.

- **The church year encourages wonder and awe.** It continually brings us into encounter with mystery and reminds us to pay attention and get ready. These are valuable spiritual practices for people of any age.

- **The church year bridges home and the wider community of faith.** Simple practices like lighting Advent candles translate easily from church to home. When children see what happens in church echoed at home, they begin to connect the two, reinforcing their identity as part of a larger family of faith.



From my home to yours, here are some of the traditions my family has kept for decades. Rather than constantly trying to come up with novel ideas, we returned to these year after year and let them become beloved parts of our own family story as we journeyed together around the circle whose ending is always a new beginning.

FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH YEAR

- **Seasonal Table.** A seasonal table is a small space dedicated to displaying items related to the season. Ours was a tiny table I found at an auction and refinished, but you could also use a shelf. I hemmed cloths for our table in the liturgical colors and we made a ritual of changing them when each new season began. On the table we kept little treasures: leaves, stones, eggs, shells, flowers, drawings, photographs, candles, or anything else that felt special and connected with the meaning of the season. During Advent, for example, the table was covered with a purple cloth

and held a wooden spiral with a candle that could be moved one space ahead for every day. For Lent we set out a dish of sand to represent the desert, and added some stones, or a vase of bare branches. On Pentecost we changed the cloth to red and added pinwheels and a basket with bottles of bubble solution. Whatever you choose to put on it, the seasonal table is sacred space—a daily reminder of the of the circle of the Christian year and the many treasures it holds.

- **Sacred Symbols Bowl.** If you don't have space in your home for an extra table, you can use a *sacred symbols bowl*. Just find a pretty bowl or basket and put in it a few small items that you and your family find special or meaningful: a marble in a beautiful colour; a prism that creates rainbows; a postcard or photograph; a flower or leaf you found outside; a piece of clay; a pebble; a small tea light. Keep changing the contents of the bowl. The point is to choose what is significant to you and your family, and to talk about how the items connect to the season.
- **Seasonal Tree.** Another way of marking the changing seasons is with a seasonal tree. This could be some branches in a vase, a small tree in a pot, or a tiny artificial tree. For each season, make simple ornaments (e.g. paper stars for Epiphany, snowflakes for Christmas, tissue paper blossoms or butterflies for Easter).
- **Book Basket.** Set aside a basket large enough to hold an assortment of picture books. Visit your local public library or church library and fill the basket with seasonal books. Make a habit of reading them aloud together and when the season changes, borrow new books for the basket! If there are clear favourites, maybe you can buy copies for your collection at home.

AROUND THE CIRCLE SEASON BY SEASON

ADVENT

- **Advent Candles.** Lighting Advent candles is a simple and effective way to echo what children see in worship. While in some contexts it makes sense to use battery-powered tealights, there is nothing like a real flame that gives off light and warmth and mesmerizes us with its dancing. You don't need a fancy candle holder: votive candles in a muffin tin or tea lights in small glass jars work perfectly well. The key is consistency: light the candles at the same time every day (maybe at the evening meal) with a very simple statement or prayer: *This is the candle of hope. We light this candle to help us remember that God gives us the gift of hope. Or, This is the light of hope. The light shines in the darkness.* (And so on with *peace, joy, and love.*)
- **Advent Chain.** We started making paper chains for Advent years ago and even now that my kids are grown, we still keep the tradition. You need strips of purple cardstock, some metallic markers



or crayons, and a stapler or tape. Young children can draw decorate the strips with crayon, while older ones can write Advent words (e.g. *hope, peace, joy, love, wonder, mystery, wait, watch*). Then staple the loops together to form a chain and hang it on the tree or around a doorway.

- **Jesse Tree.** Based on the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38), a Jesse tree is an alternative to an Advent calendar. Each day, a new ornament representing an ancestor of Jesus is hung on the tree. As the ornament is put in place, someone tells the story that goes with it. This is a great way of setting the coming of Jesus in its larger biblical and historical context. Making one takes work, but you can use it year after year. Ours consists of a central post crossed with wooden dowels with cup hooks screwed into them. The ornaments, made of polymer clay, hang from the hooks. You could also use cardstock, salt dough, or even paper to make the ornaments, and hang them on branches. A book like *The Jesse Tree* by Geraldine McCaughrean and Bee Wiley is good for inspiration. For very young children, keep the storytelling short and simple.

CHRISTMAS: GOD WITH US

- **Light in the Darkness.** Replace your Advent candles with a white pillar candle. Each night during the twelve days of Christmas, at the time when you would normally light the Advent candles, turn off the lights and light the Christ candle with some simple words like: *This is the light of Christ. The light shines in the darkness. Wherever we are, Christ is with us.* Spend a few minutes sitting quietly, enjoying the light. As your children get older, you may wish to read the opening verses of the Gospel of John (1:1-5). Even if they don't understand the words, they can still feel the mystery.
- **Candle Prayers:** As you sit around the Christ candle, picture people you love who are far away in space or time (including those who have died). Name them in a simple prayer: *God with us, into the circle of your love and light we bring [name].*
- **Twelve Days of Picture Books.** A fun way to emphasize that Christmas is a whole season and not just one day is to spread the gift giving out over all twelve days. I like to do this by wrapping up twelve Christmas picture books and letting the kids open a new one each night. You don't have to buy twelve books; borrow some from the library. You can repeat some year after year. Most children love hearing their old favourites read over and over.



EPIPHANY

- **Epiphany Parade.** Our family tradition for epiphany involved making paper crowns and a big glittery star which we hung from a broom handle and carried at the head of a parade around our home. The procession was accompanied by singing an Epiphany song (e.g. *We Three Kings* or *Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning*).



LENT

- **Pretzels and Hot Cross Buns.** When my son was still in a highchair, we started a tradition of making pretzels during Lent, and hot cross buns on Good Friday. Even very young children can pour flour, scoop raisins, smell spices, and watch in amazement as yeast bubbles up in a bowl. Traditional pretzels have a lot of steps, so you could simplify by using frozen bread dough, but it really is satisfying to go through the whole process yourself if you have time.
- **Pray in Color.** Sometimes referred to as holy doodling, this is a wordless and open-ended kind of prayer that involves starting by visualizing a person or situation (or even a concept like peace or hope) and then letting your mind relax and your hands take over as you doodle shapes and lines on a piece of paper. It's a great way of introducing kids to the idea that contemplative prayer is about communion (being present) with God, rather than asking for what we want. To learn more, check out *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* by Sybil MacBeth (Paraclete Press). You can also get templates from her website: prayingincolor.com.

HOLY WEEK

- **Go to church.** Because I grew up attending Holy Week services, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, it never occurred to me not to bring my own children. I wanted them to experience the whole story, not leap from Palm Sunday to Easter without passing through the days in between. We need the intimacy and poignancy of the Last Supper, the sorrow of Good Friday, and the hollowness of Holy Saturday, so we can fully experience the joy of Easter Sunday. I always brought crayons and sketch books to church with us and encouraged my kids to draw what they were seeing and hearing and feeling.
- **Easter garden.** On Good Friday, we often made an Easter garden by pouring potting soil into a pie plate and sprinkling it with grass seed or some other fast-growing seed. We then added a tomb sculpted from plasticine or air-drying clay. If you do this, be sure to water the seeds! Hopefully, in a few days they will germinate. No wonder Jesus talked about seeds so often. There is something miraculous about seeing something so small spring to life.
- **Decorate an Easter tree.** One feature of our seasonal table during Lent was a vase containing bare branches. On Holy Saturday we would usually dye eggs or make butterflies by wetting coffee

filters and putting drops of food colouring on them. When they were dry we would pinch them in the middle and wrap them with a pipe cleaner to create wings and antennae. Very early on Easter morning, while it was still dark, I would hang the eggs and butterflies on the bare branches—a transformation the kids always loved, even when they knew it was coming!



EASTERTIDE

- **Felted eggs.** When Easter fell later in April and the weather was warmer, my kids loved to felt eggs. This activity can get a bit messy, so we always did it outside. You need plastic eggs, wool rovings (wool fibres that have been cleaned and dyed but not spun) in different colours, a large bowl of warm water, and soap. Wrap the wool fibres firmly around a plastic egg, wet it thoroughly, cover it with soap, then rub it between your hands until the fibres begin to stick to one another. Keep adding layers of wool, wetting and soaping the egg as you go, and rubbing it to felt the wool. You might need to add more hot water. When the plastic eggs are covered and the wool is nicely felted, toss the eggs in the clothes dryer for a cycle. When they come out, you can put them in a bowl or attach loops of ribbon and hang them on your Easter tree. Or, you can cut each one around the centre, leaving a hinge at the back, and remove the plastic egg to use another year.

ASCENSION

- **Changing the Light.** The most meaningful ascension tradition for our family was telling the story from *Godly Play* or *Children and Worship*. The only physical items used are the Christ candle and a snuffer. The candle is lit to represent the presence of the light of Christ in one place and one time. Then it is *changed* (carefully extinguished so smoke rises from the wick) to show how the Light that was in one place and time can be with us in every place and every time. Not only is this a powerful image for the ascension of Jesus, it can also be a way of thinking more broadly about death and change. Children who have heard this story told over and over have something strong to draw on in times of loss. They have a way of holding together the sadness of missing someone with the assurance that those we love are still with us in a different way.

PENTECOST

- **Bubble prayers.** Our favorite Pentecost tradition was blowing bubble prayers. On warm day, go outside with bottles of bubble solution. Talk about people and situations you want to pray for. Or think of needs in your community or the whole world. What would you like to give to the world? Peace? Kindness? Compassion? Understanding? Blow bubbles, imagining that each one is a prayer, formed by your breath, and carried on the wind into the world.
- **Prayer flags.** Prayer flags are another lovely way of praying with the wind. You can make them out of fabric or paper. Think about your hopes and dreams for the world, or about specific people

and situations to whom you want to send love and peace. Draw, paint, or sew flags with words or symbols on them representing your prayers. Then attach the flags to a string or cord and hang them outside. As they flutter, imagine that the wind is carrying your prayers where they need to go.

- **Breath paintings.** Pour a small amount of acrylic paint in a few different colours on a piece of paper. Using a reusable straw, blow through the straw to spread paint around the paper. Even without touching the paint, the power of your breath can create beautiful abstract art!

THE GROWING TIME

- **Friendship flowers.** Like most siblings, my kids sometimes fought. Now and then it helped to get them to sit down and express what they appreciated about each other. To help us do this, we used a flower activity inspired by *Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness With Children* by Thich Nhat Hahn. For each child you need a cardstock circle (about six inches in diameter), a stem and leaves, and an assortment of cardstock petals. Write each child's name on their circle. Then help each child write on the petals something they appreciate about each of the other children. Make sure each child has an equal number of petals written about them. Distribute the petals and help the children glue their own petals to their centre, stem, and leaves. How does it feel to hear good things said about you? Talk about how we can help people grow by using our words to encourage them.
- **Fruits of the Spirit prayer beads.** I have always loved Paul's words about the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-26. Instead of focusing on the negative—what we should not do—they call our attention to the positive attributes of a life nourished by the Spirit. The only problem with these “fruits” (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) is that they are rather abstract. Young children need to be prompted and guided to think about what these qualities actually look like in practice. Good books can help. One of my favourites is *What if God is Like That Too?* by Jennifer Grant (Beaming Books). With my own kids, we often followed up the conversation by making prayer beads. We used polymer clay to shape beads representing each fruit, then used them to help guide us as we meditated on how we might bring these qualities to life in the world.



ALL HALLOWTIDE

- **Cloud of witnesses.** My children grew up far from any extended family, so they always valued any opportunity to be reminded that they are part of a bigger family of faith, and that distance and time are no barrier to love. All Hallows' Eve (Hallowe'en), All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are the perfect time to remember this. You can set out photos and objects representing people you love who are far away, who have died, or who have shown the love of God to you and to others. Then light candles to give thanks for them, with a simple prayer: *Thank you God, for [name] who shows us your love and light.*
- **Memory Meal.** Hosting a meal in memory of a loved one can be very meaningful. Include their favourite dishes and ask everyone who comes to tell a story about the person. In lieu of a full meal, you could also just make one thing that your loved one liked to eat and share it with your family while you tell stories. Believe it or not, my son and I once did this to honour my mom, who loved a particular type of cheezies. We set out photos of her, lit candles, made tea, and shared a bowl of cheezies while we talked about what we miss most about her.

