

Why do we run around like crazy trying to get our home in order before someone comes for a visit? Well, visits do prove to be more enjoyable if we prepare before our guest arrives. It feels so much nicer to greet your guest with a peaceful heart and home than with a frenzied mind and unkempt space. It has probably been a while since any of us has welcomed relatives or friends into our homes so let's talk about how we prepare for an upcoming visit.

There are two main ways we prepare:

1. We clean our homes and prepare space for the visitor.
2. We clear space in our calendars, creating time to spend with our visitor.

Let's pretend that Jesus is coming for a visit. Oh wait, he is coming for a visit! Advent starts today! This important season of the church spent anticipating Jesus's birth and His arrival on Earth is here! So, how can we prepare our hearts and homes for the most important visitor of all, Jesus Christ?

First, let's clean our homes and prepare space for the visitor. Most of us take great pleasure in decorating for Christmas and transforming our homes for this special time of year. Today I will speak specifically about freshening up our home altars, an important part of Advent.

Your altar has the potential to be a focal point for your Christmas decorating. So, if your altar has been put away or shimmied into a corner its time to bring it out and put it in a prominent spot.

We always start with a cloth to cover our altar. This year I chose this Scandinavian cloth my mother gave to me. It has a blue color, close to Mary's saron blue, but purple is another traditional choice. **Put out cloth.**

Next, I put out a source of light, such as a candle. If you were lucky enough to attend yesterday's Advent wreath making event you could use an Advent wreath instead. The light symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit. **Put out candle.**

Then I assemble a small creche scene. I know a lot of you have large creches and those can be a part of your home altar, of course, but this is a great chance to use one of your smaller creche sets with fewer pieces. **Put out creche.** I place this creche in the center of the altar because the Advent season is centered on the birth of Jesus. I will include a Christmas star as well, also symbolizing the Christ child. **Put out star.**

I also have a holding cross and a Way of Love token to remind me of our St. Paul's church family that I miss so very much. **Put out cross and token.**

Next, I put out my prayer book, daily devotional booklet, and this book, *The Way to the Manger*. **Put out first 2 books.** All our church school families received a copy of this lovely book in their Season of Advent goodie bags which were recently delivered to their homes. Since our church school kids will not be able to attend church school this December nor participate in a Christmas Eve pageant, I thought it was very important for each family to have such a resource. **Put out last book.** Seasonal poetry books and a Bible would also be good options.

It is also nice to have something living on your altar. I chose these two pinecones. **Put out pinecones.** They remind me of winter – coming soon! and the holiday season.

Since this will be no ordinary Advent and Christmastide, I am choosing to put out a plant, a small poinsettia. **Put out poinsettia.** To me this poinsettia symbolizes all the lives lost to COVID-19. I really wanted to have something lovely to tend to, something concrete to focus on and pray over during these challenging times.

This Christmas will also be different because we will not be able to gather with family and friends as we would like to. These two gnomes, made of felt, symbolize the family and friends I will be missing. **Put out gnomes.**

The items I have chosen for my altar have personal meaning to me. This star was made by my son when he was in preschool. This creche belongs to my daughter. These gnomes were made by two of my nieces. This altar set up is far from traditional but it colorful, warm, and special to my family. I'm sure your altar will look quite different from mine, and also lovely! Be sure to send a picture to Mother Dee of your Advent home altar once you have it all set.

Now that my altar is complete and I have space set aside for my visitor, Jesus, next I need to clear some time to spend with Him. Think about how you will welcome him into your heart this Advent season. Daily or weekly prayers? Meditations at the altar? It would be great to start a ritual centered around your home altar that suits your lifestyle. May I recommend using antiphons? I found an article featured in Building Faith, a newsletter produced by the Virginia Theological Seminary, entitled, "Antiphons for Advent." Antiphons were written with parts of the Psalms and other verses from Hebrew Scripture and were sung as an early Christian ritual. Each day of Advent has an antiphon and a reflection question. These two elements can be put into a brief order for daily prayer with a candle or Advent wreath. I have copies available for those of you

here and can email copies to those of you at home. Please send me an email request.
Here is one of the featured prayers:

God of hope, when Christ our Savior appears,

May he not find us asleep or idle,

But active in His service and ready for joy.

Come, O Emmanuel,

You are the way, the truth, and the life;

Come, living Savior, come to your world, which waits for You. Amen.