

# Go to the Manger & Find Your Prince of PEACE



Illustration by Kim Wilson

## Using the Family Manger as a Hands-on Advent Calendar

By Cathy Gilmore©2014

This easy Advent devotional activity invites families to build habits virtue and prayer during Advent in ways that engage children's conscience and imagination without becoming a tedious strain for parents. Teachers can adapt this activity for classroom use also. "Go to the Manger" uses simple, on hand, materials to create a profound experience for both children and adults. With the aid of concrete objects, families are able to prepare their hearts for Jesus, the tiny baby who brings peace in our hearts and among us all.

### Supplies:

- Any kind of nativity scene with individual figures  
(You can even make your own figures out of Sculpy)
- Additional animal, action or princess figures that are a favorite to your child/ren
- A piece of green fabric approx. 10" x 36"
- A glass jar with lid or a small gift box for "treasure gifts"
- Some loose change for "treasure gifts" that can be added to along the way



### Step One: Set Up

On the first Sunday of Advent, gather your figures and nativity scene. Choose figures that you don't mind children handling. Set the grotto at one end of the green fabric. When you begin, set up your grotto without the holy family figures in it. Put Place them out in front of the stable for the first few days. (To remind the children that Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus weren't always in there. They had to make the journey too.)

Set your scene up as a dining table centerpiece, on the brick ledge in front of a fireplace, or near your Christmas tree. What's important is that it will be a place where the family can gather, low enough for the young children to reach, but not so accessible that young children "move" everyone else's figures constantly.

## Step Two: Choose 2 Figures

Each family member participating will choose **two** figures to move each day during Advent.

### Figures:

- 1) The **first figure will represent the person him or herself**. Lambs are a natural, but it can be any animal, or “person” figure. Jesus’ “flock” is the peaceable kingdom in which all people will be loving brothers and sisters and all animals are friends. If a villain figure is chosen, the child must understand that Jesus’ love changes hearts and so the villain will be a new person (may need a different figure) by Christmas. A predatory animal doesn’t need to be swapped out, just his/her demeanor will change.
- 2) The **second figure represents someone the participant is choosing to pray for** in a special way each day. Child can choose any animal or “person” figure to represent that person. This aspect of the activity highlights that Jesus’ love is always a gift for us to share. His love draws us close to Him AND to each other. Also, it is an example of how we can help others come with us to heaven. It can either be someone the participant knows, or a public figure in need of prayer. These figures can be called a “prayer buddy”. Identity of prayer buddy can be kept secret, like a spiritual “secret Santa” or fully known.

## Step 3: Reflect / Cultivate Prayer and Virtue

Either at dinner time or before bedtime, each family member can move his or her figures one step closer to baby Jesus each day. Do a mini examination of conscience to see if everyone met the two criteria for moving figures. It’s the same as what brings us to Heaven: loving God and treating others with love. Before moving figures, children need to tell how they did the following:

- 1) **Prayed at least one daily sincere prayer to Jesus for their prayer buddy**
- 2) **Treated others with love during the day.**



In addition to moving their figure for prayer and good actions each day, **participants can acquire “treasure gifts”** to bring to the stable for acts of superior kindness, obedience, or prayer. When anyone goes the “extra step” they can earn treasure to give to the Holy Family (coins to go in a jar behind the grotto). Coins can be brought to church on Christmas Eve or be dumped into a charity bucket on or after Christmas day.

If someone has a very bad day and did not love God or others very well, they can choose to be “stuck” and not move their figure. However, to build genuine humility, let it be the child’s choice to be stuck for a day. When they go the “extra step” at other times, they can also make up for “stuck” days. If, for whatever reason, anyone’s figure arrives at the stable long before Christmas, that’s OK. They can still take steps within the stable to explore it, around the back to protect from bad guys, or steps that simply keep their figure so, so close to Jesus.

By the time Christmas comes, your menagerie gathered at the manger will inspire everyone...with hope that our love for the babe in the manger will bring PEACE to our world!

*This activity is designed to bring your family one of the best Christmas gifts of all: a home that is a “Peaceable Kingdom”*

*in which our love for the Prince of Peace makes all of us loving brothers, sisters and friends!*

This activity was inspired by the book, **Little Lamb Finds Christmas**, by Cathy Gilmore, Liguori Publications©2014  
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