

Nesting

If you've ever lived with a pregnant woman, you're familiar with the nesting phenomenon. Expectant mothers can go slightly overboard preparing their homes for the arrival of a new baby. It starts with intense cleaning—and not just your average sweep-the-kitchen-floor and wipe-down-counters cleaning. It's pull-out-the-couch and vacuum-the-ceiling, which then progresses to obsessive organizing.

When Bryna was eight months pregnant with Zack, I remember walking through the hallway in our Baltimore row house looking for her. Instead, I encountered an empty linen closet. She was on the floor with every sheet, towel, comforter, and pillowcase we owned. Closet shelves were being sterilized and lots of sorting was involved. I forgot whatever I thought was so important and went back in the bedroom to hide.

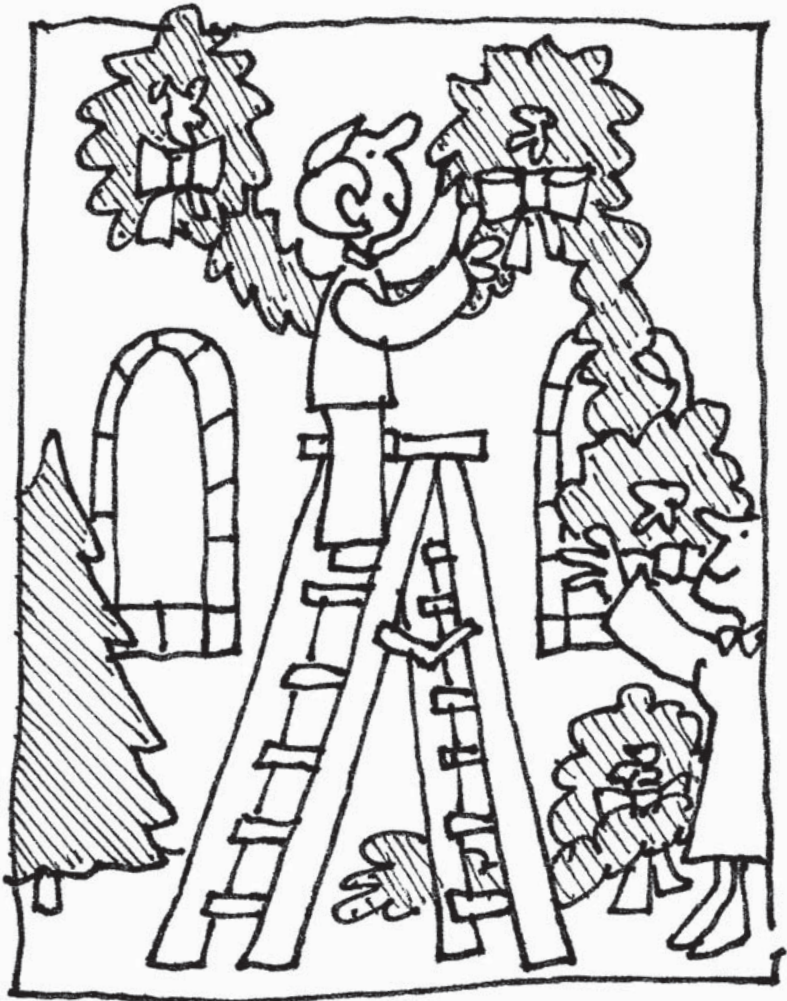
I'm not sure if Mary did any nesting such as tidying up the stable or sweeping up hay. Scripture doesn't

mention there being a whole lot of time between arriving in Bethlehem and giving birth to Jesus, but nesting is really a form of preparation, and preparation is hard work.

Advent preparation involves a blend of anticipation, excitement, and anxiety. It sets us slightly on edge, gets our adrenaline pumping, heightens awareness, and keeps us alert. Of course, Advent isn't just about getting ready for a single big day; it's also a reminder to be vigilant in leading a life of anticipatory preparation and joy.

Like most families, our preparations for Christmas aren't just spiritual; they come in a box. Or more precisely, a bunch of boxes up in the attic. I find this section of our storage closet spookier than the single box of Halloween decorations. The boxes seem to multiply each year, and I swear we have enough ornaments to trim every tree on our block.

Bryna is, thankfully, the steward of these boxes. She knows what's in them, and, while I'm happy to haul them downstairs, I do my best to stay out of the way when they get unpacked. I recognize some of what's inside—like the icicle lights I wrestle with each year and the papier-mache golden reindeer that's missing part of an antler—but much of it I swear I've



never seen before. What happens next is a kind of spiritual nesting. The decorations are carefully placed on tabletops and in windows, and the stockings are hung by the chimney with care in hopes that baby Jesus soon will be there.

A balance is needed between practical and spiritual preparation. It's one thing to pray a lot and go to church every Sunday in Advent. You won't ever hear this parish priest complaining about too much of that. But the decorations are important since they communicate that something unusual and exciting is about to take place. Both children and adults respond to the tangible preparations of December. When the tree goes up and the lights go on, that old Christmas magic comes alive—but if we become focused solely on the tinsel and the placement of the mistletoe, then the connection to our Savior's birth is lost. Together, however, practical and spiritual preparations bring even more joy to the season by heightening the anticipation.

At church, this involves putting up greenery during Advent. We gather a group together for what I always refer to as the "Greening of the Church." Wreaths adorn the walls, garlands are strung, and trees are set up. This process used to be called the "Hanging of the Greens" until a new family named "Green" started attending.

Sometimes the boys will help out at church, but they're much more interested in tree trimming at home—at least when it's on their terms. Ben and

Zack both have their favorite ornaments that have become part of the trimming ritual. Every year, Ben reverently places the Baltimore Ravens football-shaped ornament onto a visible branch, while Zack seeks out the one of Snoopy playing a saxophone. They help out with the lower branches until I go to change the Christmas music in the other room, at which point they flee to video game heaven. I like to hang the ornament we bought for Ben while on vacation in Wisconsin before he was born. It reminds of my first encounter with a nesting mother-to-be, and it sends a brief chill down my spine.