

THE CHRISTMAS CYCLE



*Today in the town of David
a Savior has been born to you;
he is Christ the Lord.*

—Luke 2:11



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THE ADVENT SEASON



Advent—What Is It?

Advent is the time of preparation before the celebration of the birth of Christ. The word *advent* is from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming,” referring to the coming birth of Jesus. Advent comprises the four Sundays preceding Christmas and signals the start of the Christian year. Historically, Advent focused on the second coming of Jesus and thus was the season concluding the Christian year. Today Advent encompasses both themes: the expectation of the second coming of Christ and the beginning of the Christian year inaugurated by the hope of Christ’s birth.

Advent was not celebrated until the fourth century following the introduction of Christmas to the Christian calendar. This season originated as a period during which converts prepared themselves for baptism through instruction, prayer, fasting, and reflection, much like Lent. The length of Advent varied from three days to six weeks, in observance of the approximate length of time that Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry.

Advent remains a time of preparation, prayer, joy, and happiness as a celebration and remembrance of the first Advent of Jesus, the Incarnate One. Even though the modern lectionaries focus the Advent texts on the preparation for Christ’s birth, rather than on His second coming, preachers should not forget Advent’s somber prophetic tone. Some of the lectionary readings for Advent reflect this by including a strong note of accountability and judgment of sin.

These readings remind us of the role of the King who comes to rule, save, and judge the world.

Advent is a rich mix of politics, prophecy, prayer, and perseverance. It is a season to prepare hearts to remember what God has done in Jesus and to anticipate what is to come. The challenge of Advent is to live in the present, to embrace the present, to celebrate the present, but to also look forward to God's ultimate redemption. The Christian task is not simply to wait white-robed for the soon coming Jesus but rather to participate in God's involvement and presence throughout all ages, including the present kingdom of God. Advent prompts us to ask the question, "God, I don't know what You are doing today, but I want to be part of it." The challenge and joy of Advent is preparation for the advent of Christ into our world, which not only happened over two millennia ago but also is happening daily as we live as "Advent people," anticipating His daily presence and His future appearing.

It is important to remember that the seasons of Advent and Christmas are different. Some traditions do not sing Christmas songs during Advent but focus primarily on preparation for the birth of the Christ child. Since the themes of expectation and longing are key to the Advent season, it is important to focus on preparation. Singing a song such as "Joy to the World" seems to be a bit out of sequence. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is much more appropriate for this season. It focuses on the expectation and anticipation of the coming birth of the Promised One. Advent prepares us for the celebration of Christmas much like the season of Lent prepares us for Easter. Other traditions blend the two themes so as to allow congregants to remember and celebrate both aspects of the Advent season.

The Advent Wreath

One way to mark these weeks of preparation is with an Advent wreath, which can be created both at home and at church. The spe-

cific origins of the Advent wreath are not known, but historians believe it began centuries ago in Eastern Europe, perhaps in Germany. The wreath is made with pine boughs and evergreens to symbolize everlasting life, the gift Messiah Jesus brought into the world. The circle represents the eternal nature of God.

The Symbols of the Advent Wreath

The purpose of the wreath is to deepen our understanding of Christmas.

1. The base of the wreath is covered with green—the color green testifies to the continuation of life in Christ.
2. The circular base represents life without end—eternal life.
3. The candles signify God's Son as the Light of the World.

There are five candles in all. The first, second, and fourth candles are violet or purple, the royal color, to symbolize our penitence and preparation. The third candle is pink to symbolize joy and happiness, the symbol of hope. In the center of the wreath is the white candle, which represents Christ. White refers to the Lord's purity and perfection. These candles represent the four Sundays preceding the Nativity, one candle being lit each Sunday, with the white candle at the wreath's center being lit on Christmas Eve. All red or all blue or all white candles may be substituted if desired.

How to Make an Advent Wreath

The wreath should be in the form of a circle. The base of the wreath can be made from Styrofoam, wire, or wood. Anchor the candleholders securely in the base.

Cover the base with greenery. If live evergreens are used, make sure to protect them from fire. Spraying them with fire retardant is an excellent precaution and will ease your mind.

The Advent Candles

Each candle communicates a particular weekly Advent theme. There are several ways of naming or describing the weekly themes

represented by the candles. The following is the one I prefer, but there are other ways of viewing the weekly progression.

- The first candle symbolizes *Prophecy*, which calls attention to the prophecies of the coming Savior. It calls us to prepare for Christmas by prayerfully humbling ourselves before God.
- The second candle represents *Bethlehem*, the lowly birthplace of our Savior.
- The third candle is the *Shepherd* candle, colored pink to represent joy and celebration. The shepherds remind us that we share in the joy of Jesus' birth.
- The fourth candle is the *Angel* candle, which reminds us of the messengers who came to proclaim Christ's birth.
- The fifth candle is the *Christ* candle that symbolizes Christ's presence in our world.

Robert Webber argues that “the colors of the candles can celebrate the twin themes of Advent—preparation and joy. Since preparation is solemn and even penitential, the first, second, and fourth candles should be dark blue or purple. The third candle, which symbolizes the joy of anticipation, is always rose-colored. And the Christ candle is white, the symbol of festivity.”¹ The candles of the Advent wreath provide a way of counting down the days until Christmas. The scriptures that accompany each theme cover the entire Advent story.

If December 24 is a Sunday, the morning worship service is considered the fourth Sunday in Advent and the late afternoon or evening worship is Christmas Eve.

The Five Candles and Their Symbolism

1. First Candle: First Sunday in Advent

Color: Purple

Story: Prophecy

Theme: Hope

Alternate Theme: Vigilant waiting for the birth of Christ

2. Second Candle: Second Sunday in Advent
Color: Purple
Story: Bethlehem
Theme: Peace
Alternate Theme: Personal preparation for the birth of Christ
3. Third Candle: Third Sunday in Advent
Color: Pink
Story: Shepherds
Theme: Joy
Alternate Theme: The joy of our waiting
4. Fourth Candle: Fourth Sunday in Advent
Color: Purple
Story: Angels
Theme: Love
Alternate Theme: The incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary
5. Center Candle: Christmas Day
Color: White
Theme: Christmas
Alternate Theme: The birth of the Savior²

Practical Ideas for Use of the Wreath

Using the wreath for public worship during the Sundays of Advent. It is appropriate to have a short candlelighting ceremony during each of the four worship services in Advent. Each week an individual or group can begin by lighting the candles that were lit the week(s) previously, naming them as they do. In this way they remind the congregation of the meaning of the previous candles. Participants then light the candle for the present Sunday, read scripture connected with that Sunday's theme, and offer a simple prayer that reminds the congregation of the season. (A suggested script is provided in Appendix 1 for each of these presentations, or participants can be encouraged to write their own scripts.)

Using the wreath for public worship on Christmas Eve or

Christmas Day. Light the four candles in the order you lit them before, again naming them and explaining the significance each one represents. Light the center candle with a short presentation or reading. If your church does not have a Christmas Day service, it would be appropriate to light the Christ candle during the Christmas Eve service.

Using the wreath for private home devotions. Christian rituals are of great importance in the character formation of children. Family rituals will help develop Christian attitudes, habits, and values as children grow and ultimately form their own families. These rituals also create strong ties that help to weave the family together. Gathering the family each day during the Advent Season to light the candles on a family Advent wreath, sing, pray, study the ancient stories, and share ideas, thoughts, and insights of the season may be the most important gift you give your child. Christmas toys will break and clothes will soon be outgrown, but the gift of our time in preparing our hearts and those of our children will be long-lasting. (See the “Advent Family Worship Guide” in Appendix 2.)

Along with lighting an Advent wreath, another way a family can count down or celebrate the Advent season is to create an Advent calendar. Children create a calendar that has hidden windows over each date. As each day passes, the window coverings are removed and the picture or symbol narrates part of the story of Christmas. Advent calendars can also be purchased at Christian bookstores, online, or at some retail outlets. Another way to participate is to create a Jesse Tree. A Jesse Tree can either be a banner or a poster. Pictures, ornaments, or symbols are pinned to the tree as the story of the Incarnation is told. Several options for the ornaments as well as the stories of the Jesse Tree may be found on the Internet.