

Church Traditions: Advent

The Season of Advent



Advent is the first season of the church year, it begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. There are always four Sundays in Advent.

The season of Advent gets its origins from the early Christians, who following Jewish custom, celebrated the beginning of the year in the spring. However, in the fourth century Christmas was introduced as a religious festival, and Christians began using this new feast to mark the beginning of the year.

Advent seems to have grown out of an early Christian practice having to do with a fasting period for candidates, who were to be received in the Church on Epiphany, January 6th. With the introduction of the new festival, Christmas, this period of preparation was prefixed to Christmas and developed into a period of preparation for everyone.

Advent, like Lent, is considered a period of penitence. We prepare ourselves for the coming of the King. **Advent means coming**, generally in at least three senses: (1) the **coming** of Christ in the flesh, to be commemorated at Christmas; (2) the **coming** of Christ in Word and Spirit, to be pondered throughout the church year; (3) the **coming** of Christ in glory at the end of time. The keynote of the season is sounded in the Gospel appointed for the first Sunday in Advent:

**Tell the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of an ass.**
(*Matthew 21:5*)

The color used during the season of Advent has been recently changed to blue. **Blue is the color of royalty. Blue is also the color of hope.** It is during the season of Advent that we focus our hope upon the coming of the Christ Child of Bethlehem. The church has moved away from using the purple color during Advent so to help separate the symbolism between Advent and Lent. Lent is more somber... Advent is more anticipatory.



Of the many symbols used to help us during the Advent season one of the most appropriate is of the Lamb. Jesus is often spoken of as the Lamb of God in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and in various places in the New Testament, including the Book of Revelation. But it was John the Baptist who pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God. Therefore, when this symbol appears on a shield and in proper context it refers to the words John the Baptist uttered, "**Ecce Agnus Dei**", "**Behold the Lamb of God**" (*John 1:29*). The Lamb triumphantly carries the banner of victory over sin and death. This makes a very fitting symbol for the Advent season.

The Meaning of the Advent Wreath



The traditional use of Advent candles originated in eastern Germany even prior to the Reformation. As this tradition came down to us by the beginning of this century, it involved three purple candles and one pink candle. The purple candles matched the purple paraments on the altar (purple for the royalty of the coming King). The pink candle was the third candle to be lit (not the fourth) on Gaudate Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent. "Gaudate" means "Rejoice!" in Latin, and is the first word of the traditional Introit for that day (TLH, p. 54) which is taken from Philippians 4:4.

The church has moved away from using purple during Advent so as to help separate the symbolism between Advent and Lent. Lent is more somber and purple symbolizes sorrow... Advent is more anticipatory and blue signifies Love and Hope. So today the Church uses blue paraments and blue candles.

Something else that has been added is the concept of giving each candle a name, such as, Prophecy, Bethlehem, Shepherd and Angel, etc., this is a relatively new phenomenon and probably originates with certain entrepreneurial publishers seeking to sell Advent candles and devotional booklets. With that in mind the common names and meanings are listed below.

The first candle is the Hope or Prophet candle. The candle reminds us that God made a promise to His people when the Prophets of the Old Testament pointed to the coming Messiah, the Christ Child of Bethlehem.

The second candle is the Love or Bethlehem candle. This candle represents the love of God and its glow reminds us of the warmth that fills us with the love of Christ, now and forever and thus reminds us of God's greatest gift of love, His Son. This candle also symbolizes that God chose the little town of Bethlehem to be the birthplace of our Savior.

The third candle is the Joy or Shepherds' candle. It reminds us of the Shepherds who were watching their sheep by night and who came to worship the Christ Child. This is the

rose or pink color candle to signify rejoicing. The Joy or Shepherds' Candle also symbolizes the sharing of the news of Christ's birth and to the joy he brings His people today.

The fourth candle is the Peace or Angels' candle. It reminds us of the Angels who announced the Savior's birth. Their song of joy rings across the centuries to fill the darkness of every heart with the light of God's glory and love. The Angels candle also symbolizes Christ's final coming on Judgment Day when He will appear in glory with all His angels.

Some Advent wreaths also have a white candle in the center, a **Christ Candle** to remind us of the purity of Christ and that Jesus has come. The Christ Candle is lit on Christmas Eve and is to be lit during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25-January 5).

The evergreen wreath reminds us of eternal, unchanging love of God made evident through His Son. The symbolism of the wreath reminds us of the prophet Isaiah's words: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." (Isaiah 9:2) The wreath is a symbol of endless love and faithfulness.