

COME, O CHRIST, THE LIGHT!

Lighting the Candles of the Advent Wreath

About the Tradition

One of the fondest Advent traditions for both congregations and families is the lighting of Advent candles. The tradition reaches back to pre-Christian northern Europeans. During the darkest days of winter, they lit as many as twenty-four candles on an evergreen-covered wheel or wreath. By lighting a candle a day, they marked time, anticipating the return of the sun's light and warmth. By the 1500s, many Christians had adapted the Advent Wreath as a devotional way to prepare for the coming of Christ, the Light of the World.

Today, the Advent Wreath is usually an evergreen wreath placed on a table or suspended from a ceiling or an arch. In the wreath are four candles (usually blue or purple, occasionally one is pink); each candle represents one week during Advent. A white candle is often placed or suspended in the center of the wreath.

Symbolism

The symbols of the Advent Wreath are interpreted in many ways. The circle of evergreens reminds Christians of the eternal and ever-renewing promises of Christ. The lighting of candles, spanning the season, acknowledges the deepening of our preparation and the increasing light that bursts forth at Christmas. The colors of the candles also vary. Often the candles are purple or blue, noting the season's expectations of royalty, liberation, redemption, and hope. For the third Sunday of Advent, occasionally a pink candle is lit. This recognizes a shift of Advent themes in the Bible. The first two Sundays focus on the Bible's prophetic vision of Christ's future and final return; on the third and fourth Sunday, the readings focus on the coming of Jesus, the Christ. The third Sunday traditionally recalls John the Baptist's call for repentance, and the fourth recounts God's call to Mary and her faithful response. Finally, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, a center white candle is lit. The light of Christ is fully present. Jesus is born.

Advent in your Home

As you light Advent candles, the following liturgy may enrich your holy preparation. Involve an individual or a family to light the candle and serve as readers. Use the liturgy before or following an evening meal at home, following an opening hymn, or before moving into a period of contemplation.

First Sunday of Advent (Focus: Isaiah 64:1–9)

Reader 1: O God, we light the first candle of Advent.

(A member of a family lights the first candle.)

Reader 2: We kindle it with hope. We long for you to come to our world, to break through and reign with compassion, justice, and peace.

Reader 1: The prophet Isaiah also cried to God to tear open heaven and come down. He called God's people to do right. Isaiah called them to be re-fashioned like clay by God, the Potter. This Advent, we call out to God.

All: Mighty God, creator of the world, break through all that keeps us from you. We ask for your mercy and reform us in your image. This Advent, visit us with your justice, love, and peace. Amen.

All: *(sing or recite)*

*Shine on us, O God of justice;
Guide our path through gloom of night;
Bear within us Wisdom's glory;
Come to us, O Christ the Light.*