

The Advent Wreath

For many Christians, Advent wreaths are a favorite way to celebrate the month of December leading up to Christmas Day. Although Advent Wreaths are popular among Christians, many are not aware of the rich meaning and symbolism embedded in the tradition. If we learn this meaning, we can appreciate it all the more!

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

The Advent candles readily demonstrate the strong contrast between darkness and light. In the Bible, Christ is referred to as the “Light of the World” contrasted with the darkness of sin. Human history spanned long ages before our prophesied Savior would finally make his appearance, and God’s promise to make all things new through him.

As his Advent, or “coming,” draws nearer another candle is lit, with each candle dispelling the darkness a little more. Thus, the Advent wreath helps us to spiritually contemplate the great drama of salvation history that surrounds the birth of God Incarnate who comes to redeem the human race.

SHAPE, NUMBER, AND COLOR

SHAPE: The circular shape of the wreath, without beginning or end, symbolizes God’s complete and unending love for us—a love that sent his Son into the world to redeem us from the curse of sin. It also represents eternal life which becomes ours through faith in Jesus Christ.

NUMBER: The Advent Wreath traditionally holds four candles which are lit, one at a time, on each of the four Sundays of the Advent season. Each candle represents 1,000 years. Added together, the four candles symbolize the 4,000 years that humanity waited for the world’s Savior—from Adam and Eve to Jesus, whose birth was foretold in the Old Testament.

Some Advent wreath traditions also include a fifth white “Christ” candle, symbolizing purity that is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas day. Many circular wreaths can incorporate a white candle by adding a pillar candle to the wreath center.

COLOR: Violet is a liturgical color that is used to signify a time of prayer, penance, and sacrifice and is used during Advent and Lent. Advent, also called “little Lent,” is the season where we spiritually wait in our “darkness” with hopeful expectation for our promised redemption, just as the whole world did before Christ’s birth, and just as the whole world does now as we eagerly await his promised return.

THE FOUR WEEKS OF ADVENT

During the first two weeks of Advent we light the first two purple candles. The Third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday. On this day we celebrate that our waiting for the birth of Jesus on Christmas day is almost over. Rose is a liturgical color that is used to signify joy, so we light the single pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent.

Then on the fourth Sunday of Advent, the final purple candle is lit to mark the final week of prayer and penance as we wait expectantly for the soon-coming birth of the King of Kings.

Traditionally, each of the four Advent candles have a deeper meaning which is depicted in the lovely Four Weeks of Advent Pewter Wreath:

- **The 1st Sunday of Advent** symbolizes Hope with the “Prophet’s Candle” reminding us that Jesus is coming.
- **The 2nd Sunday of Advent** symbolizes Faith with the “Bethlehem Candle” reminding us of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem.
- **The 3rd Sunday of Advent** symbolizes Joy with the “Shepherd’s Candle” reminding us of the Joy the world experienced at the coming birth of Jesus.
- **The 4th Sunday of Advent** symbolizes Peace with the “Angel’s Candle” reminding us of the message of the angels: “Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men.”

ENHANCE YOUR WREATH WITH MORE SYMBOLISM

You can festively decorate your Advent Wreath with other natural materials that traditionally carry their own Christian symbolism. The use of evergreens reminds us of our eternal life with Christ; pointy holly leaves and berries represents the crown of thorns from the Passion of Jesus and his Precious Blood; and pine cones symbolize Christ’s Resurrection.

THE BLESSING OF THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent Wreath tradition also involves an Advent wreath blessing. The wreath is blessed at the beginning of Advent in a special ceremony, so that throughout the whole four weeks you or your family will be drawn into deeper conversion to Christ through its symbolism and meaning.

“The blessing of the Advent wreath can encourage a wonderful sense of participation in the Advent spiritual journey. It is a wonderful devotion for the family, but it is also an appropriate devotion for those who live a single vocation—the blessing and the daily prayer does not have to be a group activity.”

The book goes on to describe the blessing tradition for families by saying,

“One person reads the Advent wreath blessing and a second person reads the accompanying passage from Sacred Scripture and the reflection. A third person reads the concluding prayer.”

The special Advent blessing is a wonderful way to start of the Advent season with a sense of meaning and purpose in anticipation of the many graces given during this liturgical season.

ADVENT WREATH PRAYERS

In addition to the initial blessing of the Advent wreath at the beginning of the season, there are also special Advent prayers to be said around the wreath as a candle is lit each week. Children in the family can also participate in this wonderful Christian tradition.

There are many Advent prayer books that include Advent wreath prayers to accompany the candle lighting to make it a special ceremony. The parent reads the Advent prayer, and the children can offer a response.

Here is one prayer given for the First Sunday of Advent in the same book just mentioned, *The Essential Advent and Christmas Handbook*:

Parent: Lord, you are the light of our world.

Children: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Parent: O gracious God of promise, we prepare to worship together as we await the fulfillment of your wondrous plan. Help us to grow as we hear your Word and live in your love.

Children: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Parent: May the light of your love always shine in our hearts.

Children: Amen.

Hopefully this article helped you to understand the richness and graces to be enjoyed during the Advent season. Having and blessing the Advent wreath in your home, and using it to focus your prayer and meditation on welcoming Christ Himself into your heart, is a great way to prepare for the true meaning of Christmas.