

How to Do an Advent Wreath



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Materials

The following supplies can be found at a craft store. Or, premade wreaths and candles are also usually available at Christian bookstores.

1. Small wreath (ideally one that has space for candle holders and will fit on the dinner table)
2. Candle Holders
3. Candles (3 purple, one pink and one large white)

History of the Advent Season

The term *advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming.” In the early Middle Ages, this term came to apply to a period of preparation for Christ’s birth, his “coming” into the world, on Christmas day. One of the earliest traditions associated with this season was fasting.

In fifth century France, under the direction of Bishop Perpetuus of Tours (in office from 461-490 AD), Christians fasted between St. Martin’s Day (November 11) and Epiphany (January 6).¹ Since this fast, known as St. Martin’s Lent, excluded weekends, it added up to approximately 40 days. Thus, it was compared to Christ’s time in the desert (Matthew 4:1-2) and the practice of Lent (the 40 days of fasting before Easter).^{*} Though the original fast ended on Epiphany, it eventually culminated on Christmas day (as December 25 rapidly earned prominence among Christians). With time, the practice of fasting spread and came to be specifically associated with a period of preparation for Christmas.

In the sixth century, a more formal season of Advent began to take shape. By sanctioning the practice of fasting and by encouraging churches to devote several Sunday sermons to the subject of Christ’s birth, Pope Gregory I (in office from 590-604 AD) has been credited with establishing the first clear form of an Advent season. However, Gregory granted “a certain latitude to the several churches as to the manner of [Advent’s] observance.”² Thus, for the next several centuries, the traditions of individual churches varied widely.

In regard to the length of Advent, by the 10th century, most churches recognized the season to include the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. If Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday, it was considered the fourth Sunday. Or rather, the first Sunday since “these Sundays were then counted inversely, that is, the nearest to Christmas was called the first Sunday, and so on with the rest.”³

In regard to the practice of fasting, by the 14th century, the tradition had largely been lost. Pope Urban V (in office from 1362-1370) required only that “all the clerics of his court should keep abstinence during Advent, without in any way including others, either clergy or laity, in this law.”⁴ Though fasting (an outward expression of penitence and preparation during the Advent season) is no longer formally practiced, customs associated with Advent wreaths have become a

popular way to prepare for the “coming” (or Advent) of Jesus on Christmas Day. Click here to learn more about Advent wreath traditions.

It is also interesting to consider the twofold meaning of Advent. Christians celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world over 2,000 years ago but also wait expectantly for his second coming. After giving his last instructions to the apostles, Jesus ascended into heaven. The Book of Acts records:

“[The apostles] were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:10-11).

The Latin term *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which is often used in reference to the second coming of Christ. The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus’ words about this coming, or *parousia*, as follows:

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming [the Advent] of the Son of Man. . . . all the nations . . . will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. . . . No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming [the Advent] of the Son of Man. So . . . be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:27-44).

Clearly, Jesus wants his people to be prepared for his return. Though he came first as a servant and a savior, he will come again as a ruler and a judge and will establish an eternal kingdom on a new earth. The Apostle Peter writes, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). May believers “eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Corinthians 1:7) and be ever ready for his second Advent!

1 Gueranger, Abbot. *The Liturgical Year*. Translated by Laurence Shepherd. James Duffy, 1870, p. 24.

2 Gueranger, Abbot, p. 28.

3 Gueranger, Abbot, p. 28.

4 Gueranger, Abbot, p. 26.

*The following information is drawn from Kelly, Joseph. *The Origins of Christmas*. Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 73-74: Since Easter Sunday developed into a traditional day to baptize new believers, many scholars believe that a pre-baptismal fast formed the basis for Lent. Interestingly, many Christians were also baptized on Epiphany (January 6th) — a day that is still celebrated among Eastern Christians as the day of Christ’s baptism. The pre-Epiphany fast that eventually formed the Advent season probably started as a pre-baptismal fast as well.

History of the Advent Wreath

Though there is evidence to suggest that Christians in the Middle Ages may have used lighted wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas, the first clear association with Advent is generally attributed to German Lutherans in the 16th century. However, another three centuries would pass before the modern Advent wreath took shape. Specifically, a German theologian and educator by the name of Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881) is credited with the idea of lighting an increasing number of candles as Christmas approached.¹

Wichern was passionate about urging Christians to minister to the physical and social, as well as spiritual, needs of people. He was a man who put his teaching into practice, and one of his many acts of social service included the founding of a home for poor children, the Rough House, in the city of Hamburg. Tradition holds that as Christmas approached each year, the children would daily inquire about its arrival. In 1839, Wichern ingeniously thought to use a wreath as a teaching tool. For each Sunday of Advent, Wichern positioned a large white candle in a wreath. For every other day in between, Wichern placed a small red candle in the wreath. Each day Wichern would light a candle and teach the children about Jesus. Thus, the children had a visual means to help them count the days until Christmas, and Wichern had an opportunity to help draw their focus to the purpose of Christmas. His idea was a success, and with time, it spread throughout Europe and on to North America.

Wichern's idea may also have influenced the modern Advent calendars that, beginning on December 1, count the days until Christmas. According to tradition, the Advent calendar was created by a Munich housewife for her children; the first commercial calendars were printed in Germany in 1851.²

¹ Das Rauhe Haus, "History, From 1832-1881." Retrieved August 15, 2008 from Das Rauhe Haus: <http://www.rauheshaus.de/stiftung/geschichte>.

² Encyclopedia Britannica. "Christmas." Retrieved August 15, 2008 from Encyclopedia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115686/Christmas>.

History of Advent Wreath Candles

Practices vary widely in regard to the type of evergreens used and the color of candles contained in the Advent wreath. Often, wreaths are decorated with the traditional Christmas colors of red and green. However, another common practice is to use purple and rose colored candles (a tradition originally unique to Catholics that has since grown in popularity). Generally, three purple candles and one rose candle light the Advent wreath, each being lit on successive Sundays. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday (the second Sunday from Christmas if you count inversely).



Purple is believed to represent both royalty and repentance. In ancient times, purple dyes were so rare and costly that they came to be associated with kings. Thus, purple reminds us of the royalty of the coming King Jesus. In regard to repentance, there is an intriguing connection to royalty. For it is the very presence of the Holy King that makes one painfully aware of personal shortcomings and penitent for them.

The pink candle most likely has roots in an association with Lent (as does the purple candle). For each of the seven solemn weeks of Lent, the church historically lit a candle on Sunday. The third Sunday of Lent was designated as a time to feast and remember the coming joy of the resurrection:

“In ancient times on this particular Sunday the Pope would honor a citizen with a pink rose, and as time passed the priests wore pink vestments on this day as a reminder of the coming joy. When the season of Advent was instituted, the church viewed it as a mini-Lent, a time for reflection and repentance (thus the purple). In so doing, the church adopted the first four candles of Lent and changed the third candle of Advent to pink in honor of the Lenten tradition.”¹

The third Sunday of Advent is also called Gaudete (Latin for “rejoice”) Sunday. It symbolizes joy in the midst of our preparation, and marks the halfway point toward the coming of light into the world. The pink is likened to a faded purple color as though the light is beginning to shine through it. It is “like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18).

On Christmas Day (or Christmas Eve), one tradition replaces the purple and pink candles with white. However, a more common practice is to place a white candle, called “the Christ candle,” in the middle of the wreath (leaving the purple and pink candles in place). The color white symbolizes the light, purity and holiness of Jesus. For “in him there is no darkness” (1 John 1:5) and “in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5).

¹ Tenny-Brittian, Bill. “Why Is There One Pink Advent Candle?” Retrieved August 15, 2008 from: http://www.hcna.us/columns/pink_advent_candle.html.

Advent Week 1 Reading

Advent candles are commonly lit immediately before or after dinner and burn for approximately one hour. This is a wonderful time to read Scripture as a family and discuss the reason for the holiday season — the coming of Jesus.

Though a variety of meanings have been attached to each candle, two common traditions are (1) hope, peace, joy and love and (2) promise, prophecy, proclamation and presence. The selection of verses below incorporates these various meanings on their respective week of Advent.

Light the first candle on the first Sunday of Advent (the fourth Sunday before Christmas). For the following six days, light this same candle. Consider allowing children to earn the honor of lighting the candle each day. The first candle is said to represent hope and the promises of a coming Savior. Discuss how this week's verses apply to the concept of hope.



(1.1) Promise to Abraham: God promised Abraham that all people on earth would be blessed through him. In Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, this promise was fulfilled. *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* (Genesis 12:3).

(1.2) Promise to Isaac: God promised an everlasting covenant with Isaac (Abraham's son). In Jesus, a descendant of Isaac, this promise was fulfilled. God said to Abraham, *“Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him”* (Genesis 17:19).

(1.3) Promise to Jacob (also called Israel): God promised Jacob that all people on earth would be blessed through him. In Jesus, a descendant of Jacob, this promise was fulfilled. *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring”* (Genesis 28:14).

(1.4) Promise to Judah: The Bible reveals that a descendant of Judah would be ruler over all the nations. Jesus, a descendant of Judah, is this ruler. *“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his”* (Genesis 49:10).

(1.5) Promise to the people of Israel: God promised that a Righteous One would be born out of the line of David. Jesus, a descendant of David, fulfilled this promise. *“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land’”* (Jeremiah 33:14-15).

(1.6) Promise Fulfilled: Jesus descended from the exact lineage that God promised. *“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham . . . there were fourteen*

generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ” (Matthew 1:1 and 1:17).

(1.7) Promise for All: The promise of Jesus is for all people; he offers hope! *“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6).*

Advent Week 2 Reading

Light the second candle on the second Sunday of Advent along with the first candle. For the following six days, light the first and second candle. The increase in light from week to week is meant to symbolize the coming of the light of the world, Jesus. The second candle is said to represent peace and the prophecies of a coming Savior. Discuss how this week’s verses apply to the concept of peace.

(2.1) Prophecy About a Man That Will Crush Satan: In the first book of the Bible, written over 1400 years before Christ, God told Satan that the son of a woman would crush his head. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).*

(2.2) Prophecy About a Virgin Birth: Over 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah foretold that Immanuel (which means “God with us”) would be born of a virgin. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).*

(2.3) Prophecy About the Identity of a Child: Over 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah described the identity of Jesus. *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).*

(2.4) Prophecy About the Majesty of the Child: The prophet Isaiah further described Jesus and his majesty. *“Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).*

(2.5) Prophecy About the Birthplace of the Ruler: Over 600 years before Christ, the prophet Micah foretold that the Ruler would be born in Bethlehem. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come*



for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

(2.6) Prophecy About John the Baptist: Over 400 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Malachi foretold how a forerunner would prepare the way for Jesus. John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy. *“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty*” (Malachi 3:1).

(2.7) Prophecy Fulfilled: Jesus is the only one that can bring peace with God. *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1).

Advent Week 3 Reading

Light the third candle on the third Sunday of Advent along with the first and second candles. For the following six days, light the first, second and third candle. If using a pink candle, discuss the symbolism as mentioned above.

This week, celebrate with joy that your hope in Christ is certain; prophecies about him are always fulfilled. *“And we have heard the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”* (2 Peter 1:19). The third candle is said to represent joy and the proclamations regarding the coming Savior. Discuss how this week’s verses apply to the concept of joy.



(3.1) Angelic Proclamation About John the Baptist: The angel Gabriel proclaimed to Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would prepare people for the coming of Jesus. *“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”* (Luke 1:16-17).

(3.2) Angelic Proclamation About Jesus: The angel Gabriel proclaimed to the virgin Mary that she would give birth to the Savior Jesus. *“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end”* (Luke 1:31-33).

(3.3) Elizabeth’s Proclamation About Jesus: Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, proclaimed that Mary carried the Lord in her womb. Even before his birth, John the Baptist made a unique

proclamation about Jesus by leaping in his mother's womb. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy*" (Luke 1:41-44).

(3.4) Mary's Proclamation About God: Mary proclaimed the great thing God had done in choosing her to give birth to Jesus. "*And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name'*" (Luke 1:46-49).

(3.5) Zechariah's Proclamation About Jesus: Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, proclaimed his praise that Jesus would be the Redeemer and Savior. "*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)*" (Luke 1:68-70).

(3.6) Angelic Proclamation About Jesus: An angel proclaimed to Joseph that Jesus was conceived from the Holy Spirit and would save his people. "*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'*" (Matthew 1:20-21).

(3.7) Prophetic Proclamation: Over 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah announced that the Holy One of Israel would one day be among the people. Let us sing for joy that Jesus did indeed come to live with man! "*Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you*" (Isaiah 12:6).

Advent Week 4 Reading

Light your fourth candle on the fourth Sunday of Advent along with the first, second and third candles. For the following days, however many there may be until Christmas, light all four candles. Combine the below verses, if necessary, in order to read all of them before Christmas. The fourth candle is said to represent love and the presence of the Savior. Discuss how this week's verses apply to the concept of God's love.

(4.1) His Presence Among Us: Over 400 years before Jesus, Zechariah foretold how God would one day come and live with men. "*Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the Lord. 'Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and*



will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you” (Zechariah 2:10-11).

(4.2) His Presence as a Human: Jesus left the splendor of heaven to be live on earth as a man. Therefore, *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”* (Philippians 2:5-7).

(4.3) His Presence Declared by an Angel: When Jesus entered the world, a heavenly angel reported the news to shepherds. *“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”*” (Luke 2:8-11).

(4.4) His Presence Declared by the Heavens: Even the stars made known the presence of Jesus to Wise Men. *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him”*” (Matthew 2:1-2).

(4.5) His Presence Declared by Simeon: A righteous and devout man in Jerusalem named Simeon recognized the presence of the Savior. *“Simeon took him [the infant Jesus] in his arms and praised God saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel”* (Luke 2:28-32).

(4.6) His Presence Declared by Anna: The prophetess Anna recognized the presence of Jesus, the Redeemer. *“There was also a prophetess, Anna. . . . She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them (Mary and Jospheh) at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”* (Luke 2:38).

(4.7) His Presence Motivated by Love: God sent Jesus into the world because of his great love for us! *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (John 3:16-17).

Advent Christmas Eve or Christmas Day Reading

Replace all four candles with white candles and light them and/or light a white candle in the center of the wreath. It is time to celebrate the birth of Christ, the “light of the world”! Read the following section from the gospel of John:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

“There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-14).



It may also be an appropriate time to discuss the twofold meaning of Advent. Christians celebrate the **coming** of Jesus into the world over 2,000 years ago but also wait expectantly for his **second coming**. After giving his last instructions to the apostles, Jesus ascended into heaven. The Bible records, “They [the apostles] were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:10-11).

Interestingly, the Latin term *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which is often used in reference to the second coming of Christ. Jesus spoke about this coming, or *parousia*, as follows:

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the **coming** of the Son of Man. . . .At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man **coming** on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. . . . No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the **coming** of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the **coming** of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:27-44).

Clearly, Jesus wants his people to be prepared for his return. Though he came first as a Servant and a Savior, he will come again as a Ruler and a Judge and will establish an eternal kingdom on a new earth. Peter writes, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). May believers “eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Corinthians 1:7) and be ever ready for his second Advent!