

First Advent Service

Text: John 8:12

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Theme: The Meaning of the Advent Wreath

Today many people have the misconception that Christianity is a European religion, but in reality it began in Israel and quickly spread to throughout the middle East, the Mediterranean, and northern Africa. Until about the year 500 AD, the Germanic tribes of Europe were pagans. (These are basically the people who inhabited France, Germany, Scandinavia, and Britain.) They worshiped nature spirits, whom they believed lived in the trees, rivers, mountains, and animals. They also worshiped a number of gods who had a human form, some of whom were honored for the days of the week: Tin (Tuesday), Woden (Wednesday); Thor (Thursday); and Frigg (Friday). In comparison with Greek and Roman civilization, they were barbarians. They lives in mud huts, were led by chieftains, and has a simple society based on hunting, herding, farming, and pillaging.¹



As the Germanic tribes moved south and began to conquer the Romans, they began to adopt the civilization of the Romans and the Greeks. As missionaries such as St. Patrick and Boniface brought the Gospel to the Germanic tribes of Europe, they amazingly met almost no resistance. The people quickly gave up their useless gods and came to rejoice in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Although the Germanic tribes abandoned their gods, they kept many of their traditions and folklore, but they gave them new meaning. Even the name for “Easter, the holiest day in Christianity, comes from this time. “Eastre” was the ancient Germanic goddess of spring. Of course, we no longer worship this goddess. The name of the day was retained, but the meaning was given to Christ. The same could be said of the Advent and Christmas customs that we will look at the next 2 weeks, the Advent Wreath and the Christmas Tree.

I. The history of the Advent Wreath.

The northern Germanic tribes all had great festivals on the winter solstice, which is the shortest day of the year. Germany and Scandinavia are much farther north than we are. In December it never gets completely light. In northern Germany it is only light from about 10-3, and the daylight hours are even shorter in Scandinavia. The people celebrated when the days began to lengthen again. Many of the festivals focused around a bonfire— which symbolized the light and warmth that they could soon expect, and firewheels— which were designed to coax the sun to return and bring the winter-deadened world to life again. Many of the pagan winter festivals were extremely wild. To damper the revelry, the Christian missionaries set aside a period of penitential preparation for Christmas,

¹*A Brief History of Western man*, pages 151-152.

which was the origin of Advent.²

One of the customs which the missionaries kept, but gave a different meaning to, was the firewheel. In Scandinavia evergreen branches and candles were placed on a wheel. Then the people prayed to the sun god to turn the wheel of the earth toward the sun and to lengthen the days. As with many other Christmas traditions, the beloved custom was kept, but the meaning has been changed completely.

II. The meaning of the Advent Wreath.

Our Advent wreaths still have an evergreen base. Evergreen branches are a symbol of life. The hardwood trees all look dead and bare at this time, but the evergreen trees still look alive. The branches are formed into a circle, which symbolizes life that will never end. A wreath of evergreen branches serves to remind us of the everlasting life that Christ has brought.

In addition to the greenery, an Advent Wreath has 4 candles, which symbolize Jesus Christ as the light of the world. In the middle of the Advent Wreath there is a white Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve. Traditionally in our country, three of the Advent candles are purple, a color which symbolizes both penitence and royalty, and on the third Sunday of Advent a pink candle is lit, which symbolizes joy. Traditionally the third Sunday of Advent was called “Gaudete” which means “Rejoice.” Sometimes blue candles are used rather than purple ones today to distinguish Advent from Lent. Blue is the color for hope. The candles are lit successively, to signify the coming brightness of Jesus who is the light of the world.

The thing that everyone always wants to know about the Advent wreath is what the 4 candles mean. The truth is that outside of the pink one, which means “joy,” there is no standard meaning. However, there are some meanings which have recently been attached to each candle. Some people have called the first candle “the Prophecy candle,” the second candle “the Bethlehem Candle Sunday services this year, they symbolize hope, peace, joy, and love. My own preference is the traditional meaning that they all point to Christ as the light of the world, and as that light grows, so does our anticipation of His coming.

III. Christ is the Light of the world, who gives life.

Our world is so full of darkness. There is the darkness of sin. Our own sins grieve us. We grieve when we see the evils of this world around us. There is so much hatred, greed, envy, and other vices. Sickness and other worries bring fear, and life always ends with death and mourning.

In the midst of all of that, comes this man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and He says, “*I am the light of the world.*” When His light dawns on us, it shows us our sins, and that hurts. It’s not all that different from when we go from a darkened room into the daylight. It’s unpleasant at first. It hurts when Christ’s light uncovers our sins, but when we confess those sins, He forgives them and takes them all away. It’s similar to when you find a rock on your lawn. If it has been sitting there for some time, the grass underneath it looks terrible when it comes into the light again, but as the light shines

²*Advent to Pentecost, A History of the Church Years, pages 26-27*

on that grass again, it becomes green and beautiful. The light of Christ, His Word, does hurt when it uncovers our sins, but it gives us new life as it gives us the forgiveness of sins.

The light of Christ not only gives us forgiveness, it gives us hope. In that respect, blue is a nice color for Advent and the Advent candles. There are a lot of people who get very depressed at this time of year. They have troubles, but they know they should be happy, so their misery at this time of year just makes them more depressed. We all need to know that there is hope in Christ. In Romans 8 Paul writes, *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all— how will He not also with Him give us all things?”* Then Paul goes on to say that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our Advent hymns also sing of this hope. In his hymn “O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?” Paul Gerhardt writes,

**Ye need not toil nor languish Nor ponder day and night
How in the midst of anguish Ye draw Him by your might.
He comes, He comes all willing, Moved by His love alone,
Your woes and troubles stilling; For all to Him are known.**

Christ brings light to all of the dark situations in life, because He brings the hope of His presence and His help. He will be there for you in every time of need.

Finally, His light brings life. Imagine if there were no sunshine. There would be no plants, and no life on this earth. In our part of the earth, we see the importance of the light of the sun at this time of year, because when we are tilted away from the sun in December, so many living things become dormant. Jesus is called the Light of the world especially because He gives the light of life. In John 10:10 He says, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* In John 11:25 He says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though He dies.”* He gives us life to the full now, and when we die, He will raise us to everlasting life.

As I looked at this simple verses in John 8, I realized that it summarizes the Advent wreath very well. Jesus speaks about Himself as the light of the world and how His light is the light of life. The lighted candles on the Advent wreath symbolizes Christ as the light of the world, and the green wreath reminds us of the eternal life that He came to bring.

The first Christian missionaries were pretty smart. They took the beloved traditions that the people already had and gave them new meaning in Christ. I hope that whatever traditions you use this Advent and Christmas, that they will also serve to remind you that Jesus Christ came into the world as your Savior, just as the Advent Wreath reminds us that He is the light of the world, who came to bring us life.

Amen.

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