

DEDICATION OF ADVENT WREATH FOR THE SUNDAY PRECEDING ADVENT

Traditions are not sacred. Their value lies in their capacity to open us up to what is sacred. Traditions can actually become a hindrance if we focus on the traditions themselves and lose sight of that purpose. So in anticipation of the season of Advent during which we light the Advent candles, we pause to visit the origins of common Advent traditions.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel: No one knows the name of the monk who wrote the poem, which is based on the 11th chapter of Isaiah, that became the lyrics to what is the perhaps the most-beloved Advent hymn. We do know that it was written during the “Dark Ages” when—in the absence of Bibles and general literacy—music and artwork were employed the primary vehicles of religious education. We also know that the words were translated into English and the music we are familiar with was added in the 19th century by Anglican priest John Mason Neale.

Advent itself was established in the year 567 as a season of fasting and prayer before Christmas. “Advent,” means arrival or appearance and the season prepares Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus while anticipating the return of the risen Lord.

The Advent wreath: Its origins lie in the pagan practice of bringing branches into homes and burning candles during the winter months as a sign of hope for Spring. Medieval Christians redefined the custom by identifying the candles as symbols of Christ and in the 1500s German Lutherans began to associate the wreaths with the season of Advent. Three hundred years later the modern Advent wreath took shape when Johann Hinrich Wichern, a German theologian who founded a home for poor children, used the wreath as an educational tool. He put in 4 large white candles to represent the 4 Sundays of Advent and small red candles for the days in between. Each day he would light a candle and teach the children about Jesus. Modern day practices use a variety of wreath styles, various candle colors and wide range of themes and Scripture texts. Most commonly is the use of three purple candles to remind us that Advent is a time of prayer and sacrifice and one pink candle for the third Sunday of Advent, known as “rejoice” Sunday, representing the themes of hope, love, joy and peace respectively. There is no “right way” of doing the Advent wreath but the goal is always for this—and all our traditions—to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to a fuller understanding of the God who became flesh and walked among us. So today we dedicate this wreath to those purposes.

Prayer:

God of life, people have worshiped you at low desert shrines and high upon mountaintops. They have stacked stones by rivers, created traveling tabernacles, and built temples of stone. Today, many of us worship in church buildings that have been passed down to us from previous generations along with their traditions. We seek to reignite the inherited traditions by rededicating them to the unchanging purpose of drawing us closer to you. Make this season of Advent a time of preparation so that we—and others through our witness—might know you more fully. In the name of Jesus, who is ever present with us, we pray. Amen.



ADVENT READINGS



SET #1

WEEK 1: HOPE PROCLAIMED

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Imagine you are living as a member of one of the last two tribes of Israel. The rest of the tribes have been conquered by Assyria and the people carried off to distant lands. On the outside, your land has been under siege and things look bad. On the inside, the people have turned their backs on God and have run after other gods, and everything is in turmoil. You are waiting, wondering ... Is there hope? Will God act? Then comes the word of the LORD from a man named Isaiah:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. 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. 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 9:2, 6-7 NIV).

In the midst of darkness, Isaiah proclaims the birth of a child who will grow to be King of Judah and make changes. And so the child Hezekiah did. As King, Hezekiah called the people of Judah to repent. He cleansed the temple, showed respect for Jewish religious rituals and sought justice. God acted in the history of Israel.

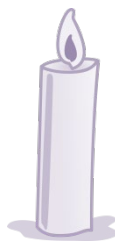
Imagine it is 750 years later. Your land is occupied by Rome and your people are habitually brutalized by Roman soldiers. Your own leaders are too busy making deals with the occupying government to look to the needs of the people. You are waiting and wondering . . . Is there hope? Will God act?

Then comes the word of the LORD. From the lips of Gabriel, Mary, and Zechariah, the words of Isaiah are heard anew. There is indeed hope. God is about to act again in human history.

PRAYER

O God, our hope,

Far too often we, members the church called "Christian," have set ourselves up as the judges of others. With our rules and self-righteousness, we have obscured the hope that lies in you. Remind us as we prepare to celebrate your incarnation among us, that you were, are, and always will be a giver of hope. Amen.



WEEK 2: THE POWER OF LOVE

Luke 1:13-17

A childless, elderly couple are about to have their lives dramatically changed. Elizabeth and Zechariah are both descendents of the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah is a priest and at the time of the story, it is his division that is serving at the temple.

Zechariah, according to the custom of the priesthood, is chosen by lot to go into the temple of the LORD and burn incense while the assembled worshipers pray outside. Inside the temple, an angel of the LORD appears standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Zechariah is startled and gripped with fear. The angel speaks:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 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 1:13-17 NIV).

An old couple. An ancient priestly line. Sacred rituals and traditions of long ago. God is about to do a new thing and God does so by beginning with what is already in place. The new does not abolish the old. Instead the new comes through the old. In turn, the old will be transformed, transcended, and in some real sense renewed—returned to its heart.

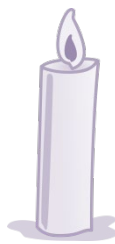
We long for God to act; to touch this sad world with healing love. Yet, don't we also fear the new, wondering what that will mean for our rituals and trappings . . . our favorite hymns and treasured buildings? If we let perfect love cast out our fears and allow God to work through us, new things can happen. The world can hear the message of God's love in new ways as we hear it with rejuvenated senses. The world can be transformed . . . and so can we.

That is the power of **love**.

PRAYER

God of love,

As Zechariah and Elizabeth tended to the business of their daily lives, they experienced the power of love. Calm our fears and remind us that you work through the ordinary things of life to do extraordinary things. Amen.



WEEK 3: MARY SINGS FOR JOY

Reflection and Scripture Reading

We've heard the story before. An angel tells a girl, named Mary, that she will have a baby who will be the "son of God." Mary responds with humble acceptance of God's will and heads off to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who is well along in her own miraculous pregnancy. Recognizing that that God is doing something wonderful through Mary, Elizabeth proclaims her blessed. And Mary responds:

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. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers (Luke 1:46-55 NIV).

In light of the circumstances, it is remarkable that Mary would praise God. She is just a child herself and finds herself pregnant and at risk of being sentenced to death for adultery. But her celebration is not focused on her "predicament." In fact she is not focused on herself at all. Mary is focused on what God is doing and on what it will mean for the world.

Listen carefully. Do Mary's words sound familiar? Have we not heard these sentiments before? The proud are brought low, the humble exalted, the poor fed, and the rich left empty-handed. These words echo through history from the lips of the psalmists, of Hannah, and of the prophets. This is the song of God's Kingdom in which the poor, the weak, and the oppressed will at last find justice. This is Mary's song. This is Hannah's song, the psalmists' song, and the prophets' song.

It is also our song. The child who grows within Mary's womb is the very presence of the long awaited Kingdom! And along with Mary we wait and wonder . . . Will the world join in Mary's song of joy? Will there be room in human hearts for Christ and his Kingdom?

Prayer

Our God and King,

As we anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth, help us follow the example of Mary by setting aside our self-absorption and humbling ourselves before you. Help us to find joy in living your kingdom on this earth by lifting up the poor, liberating the oppressed, and lending our strength to the weak. Amen.

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WEEK 4: THE REQUIREMENTS OF PEACE

Reflection and Scripture Reading

Elizabeth bore her son and named him “John.” At the child’s dedication, Zechariah celebrated what the Lord was doing through the gift of his child.

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), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace (Luke 1:68-79 NIV).

Zechariah’s Song tells us that John came to prepare the way for the Lord, by calling people to repentance and guiding us into the path of peace.

Peace. We hear the word a lot this time of year: “Praises be to God and King and peace to men on earth; Hail the newborn Prince of Peace; Sleep in heavenly peace.” But what kind of peace did John come to guide us into?

This long-awaited son left his parents to pursue a lifestyle completely different from theirs. He turned his back on the established church of his day to join a radical Jewish fringe group. The message John preached was a harsh message in which he confronted people who were complacent in their religion and ultimately this “prophet of the Most High” was beheaded at the whim of a vindictive woman and a lecherous man. Is this the kind of peace we extol in our hymns and on our Christmas cards? Where is the happy ending?

This is the shalom of God. It is a peace that costs us something, that insists on repentance from sin, that requires justice for the oppressed, help for the poor, protection for the vulnerable and absolute commitment to God’s Kingdom. This is a peace that shakes the very foundations of those who are powerful and comfortable and puts those who proclaim it at risk.

Where is the happy ending? The happy ending depends on our faithfulness and our true commitment to the **peace** of God.

Prayer

Jesus, Prince of Peace,

We have two choices this Christmas. We can pretend that all is nice and pretty or we can admit that this world is in desperate need of true peace, repent, and commit ourselves to being operatives of your Kingdom on earth. Help us to hear the call that the baby John was born to bring us. Amen.

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CHRISTMAS EVE: THE BIRTH OF JESUS (Luke 2:1-7)

Reflection

A long trip. A crowded city. Modest accommodations. A swaddled infant in a feeding trough. These are the ingredients of the most important story in human history. For all the build-up, the story of Jesus' birth is striking in its simplicity.

Soon the shepherds will come with their tales of messengers and heavenly choirs, but for now it is only Mom and Dad and their newborn son. Wearied by their respective journeys, they sleep. Mary snuggled against Joseph's protective embrace. Their child breathing delicate breaths of baby-sleep—so tiny, he seems insignificant against the backdrop of the world he is destined to save.

The babe will grow. The parents will age.

There are more difficult journeys ahead, but for this brief moment, they are simply a family.

In our celebrations laden with shiny lights, glittering ornaments, and porcelain figurines, we may lose sight of the fact that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were not only real people, but also a real family. We have decorated their story, but perhaps if we look hard enough, we can see Joseph's blistered feet, the tears of joy and exhaustion on Mary's face, and the pink wrinkles of the newborn's brow. This little family has invited the world to peek in on a most intimate moment—the birth of their firstborn child. Let us proceed respectfully, reverently, and in gratitude for their willingness to let God work through them . . . for us.

[Light the Christ candle]

PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Give us a deeper understanding of the world-changing event we call Christmas, so that we might help change the world. Amen.

WEEK 1: The Source of Hope

Genesis 1:1-3:13

The story Advent begins not with Mary and Joseph, nor with Elizabeth and Zechariah, nor even with the prophets of ancient Israel. The story of Advent begins in the beginning.

Genesis tells us that we are part of God's good creation. Together with all living things, we share the breath of life. We are connected and related to everything everywhere. Completed creation as a beautiful harmonious whole is so good that the creator takes a day off just to enjoy it. That image of wholeness and harmony in the presence of God is the essence of the Hebrew concept of shalom, which we translate as peace.

Genesis also tells us that we everyday humans reflect the image of God. Back in ancient times that would have been a radical thought. Kings and other powerful men alone were seen as the image-bearers of God, but Genesis says that whatever our age, whatever our gender, whatever our ethnicity or nationality, whatever our social or economic status, we all bear God's image. No exceptions.

It is a wonderful thing to be an image bearer of God, but it is also a huge responsibility. The very first humans had a choice between two trees in the garden where they lived. One tree, the tree of life, represents health, thriving and everything it means to be truly and fully alive. The other, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, represents the desire of human beings to play God by judging parts of creation, including other people, as good or bad. We know the choice they made. After eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and woman feel a change come over them. They no longer see God as a friend but as judge and threat. They hide in shame and fear. They blame each other and they refuse to admit their bad decision. Soon they find themselves outside the garden facing a life of hardship and pain. Later on, their two sons will repeat the same pattern and one son, Cain, will judge Abel, not a brother, but an enemy worthy of death. Thus Abel would become the first victim of violence.

God's shalom is lost.

The creation stories help us understand what's wrong with our world. Something in us as human beings is broken. We have stopped imitating God's good desires to create, bless and give life. The stories remind us also of the choice we constantly face as human beings. We can choose the second tree, so to speak, and live self-centered, competitive and destructive lives willing even to harm or kill those we see as obstacles to our desires. Or, because, even in a fallen world, God's dream of shalom is unending, we can choose to participate in that dream by using our intelligence and strength to be creative, compassionate, and generous. We can choose to be image-bearers of the living God by valuing creation and living in solidarity with all human beings.

Throughout these Advent readings, as we look at some of God's actions in human history, we will see over and over again that hope for the world lies in God's undying dream of shalom.

Light a Purple candle

WEEK 2: The Price of Peace

Micah 6:6-8

Isaiah 4:1-6

The Advent story continues with the plight of an ancient people who had been called by God to offer the world a glimpse of shalom by living a unique way of life. These people were descendants of slaves of mixed origin who escaped from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, separated into 12 tribes, and eventually became two nations known as Israel and Judah. They were given guidelines through which they could create a radically different society, one in which outsiders were welcome, persons at risk were protected, and wealth was shared.

We enter their story 600 years after the exodus from Egypt and 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Israel has been conquered by Assyria and those northern 10 tribes have disappeared from history forever. The southern kingdom of Judah, with the last two tribes, is all that remains. They too are embattled. Within a century, that nation will fall to the Babylonians and its inhabitants scattered in exile throughout the empire.

These are the people who had been entrusted with God's undying dream of Shalom. But they failed miserably. They replaced the institutions that would have ensured shalom in their land with empty religious rituals and fancy buildings. They exchanged God's hospitality and generosity for violence, greed and nationalistic pride.

Over the centuries, God raised up prophet after prophet who tried to get the people to repent. What did God want from them, they wondered? Did God desire groveling, lavish gifts, animal sacrifice, or even human sacrifice? No. The prophet Micah stated clearly what God had always desired of them: that they act justly and love mercy and walk prudently under God's guidance. But the people never heeded the call of the prophets.

Yet, even as the people were lost and endured the consequences of their failure, God's dream was not lost. The prophets looked to a day when shalom would be realized; a day as the prophet Isaiah described it, when all nations, all ethnic groups, all people would learn God's ways and walk God's path; a day when God alone would judge between the nations and settle disputes. A day when people would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and nations would never again raise swords against one another, and never again go to war.

700 years later, the descendants of Judah would find themselves living under brutal Roman occupation and barely clinging to the vision of the prophets. The stage was set for God to act again; for God raise up yet another prophetic voice to remind the people that the foundation of peace is justice, mercy and humility, and price of peace is repentance.

Light a Purple candle

WEEK 3: The Source of Joy

Luke 1:13-17; 67-80

The Advent story continues with the Jewish people living under Roman occupation. An elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were both of from priestly families, were also childless. The Gospel of Luke makes the point that they were good people who pleased the Lord, which is the first surprise in the story because childlessness was seen in those days as a disgrace indicative of God's disfavor.

When Zechariah was serving at the temple in Jerusalem, he was selected to enter the holy chamber to burn incense. Near the altar was a veil that divided the holy chamber from the holiest chamber, where God was believed to dwell. That innermost chamber was entered only once a year when the high priest made sacrifice for the atonement of Israel. At the place of passage through that veil between the holy chamber and holiest chamber, Zechariah was surprised by a messenger of the LORD, who, after offering reassurance, explained that he and Elizabeth would finally have a son. This son, however, would be not a priest like his father, but a prophet. Another surprise, as historically, prophets and priests were at odds with one another because prophets often condemned the priests for propping up political systems and maintaining religious rituals while ignoring the heart of the faith.

When the promise was fulfilled, Elizabeth surprised everyone by naming the child "John" and Zechariah surprised them by nodding in agreement. We can imagine this old man holding his long-awaited child, looking into that tiny face and proclaiming him a *prophet* of the Most High, saying *you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.* (Luke 1:70) More surprises. Not only a prophet, but a prophet who would offer the knowledge of salvation. That role belonged to priests. And peace. That word doesn't surprise us, especially this time of year, when we hear it in carols and see it written across banners, but it would have caught the attention of those at John's dedication. This child was born during "Pax Romana" or the peace of Rome, which refers to the 200 years during which Rome ruled most of the known world virtually unchallenged. Rome kept their "peace" through brutal oppression. Zechariah was speaking of a very different kind of peace, of God's dream for the world. And that mantle of shalom was falling on the shoulders of Zechariah's only child.

It is not surprising that Zechariah praised God for the birth of his son. It is surprising to the ears of modern-day faith that he didn't say "Praise God for blessing me! He's given me a child." The source of Zechariah's joy is not what God has done for him. The source of his joy is what God is doing for the world, even though it means that his son will take a dramatically different path from his own, a path that would threaten the political and religious powers of the day and put his life in danger.

True joy is about what God does through those who participate in his dream for the world, whatever the risk. And not surprising, there's more to this story.

Light the pink candle.

Week 4: Divine Love versus Human Rules

Luke 1:46-55

Matthew 1:18-24

Today we come to the part of the story that is most familiar to us.

A young woman named Mary is told by a messenger of God that she will bear a son by the power of the Holy Spirit. She humbly accepts her calling and then hurries off to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, where together they celebrate what God is doing for the world through them. When Mary's betrothed finds out that she is with child, he plans to divorce her but after hearing from God in a dream, accepts her as his wife.

Because these stories are familiar, we risk missing the radical nature of the people's choices. Easily over-looked details in the Gospels generally offer important information. Exploring such details can add to our understanding, but they can also open our eyes to parts of the story that aren't pretty.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary set off *in haste* to visit Elizabeth. 1st century Judaism forbade a woman to leave her home without permission from her father if she was single or her husband if she was married. Also, a pregnant woman was required remain in seclusion for the first five months; the Gospel notes that Elizabeth was in her 6th month and therefore out of seclusion when Mary arrived. Mary, however, in her haste broke the rules by not going into seclusion and leaving without permission.

Betrothal was arranged entirely by parents and lasted at least a year. It was a legal relationship with the woman already belonging to the man, and could only be broken through divorce, which was solely a man's prerogative.

Marriage was to be consummated by the 4th day of the marriage feast to allow for legal action in case the woman was found to be impure.

If a baby was born to an unmarried woman and she identified the father, the two were required to marry immediately without the option of divorce. If no father was identified, it was deemed incest and both the mother and child were banished or stoned.

The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both parties.

The Gospel of Matthew says that Joseph decided to divorce Mary **secretly** because he did not want to expose her to public disgrace and stoning, which was the requirement of the law. I also refers to Joseph as *diakos*, which is Greek for "righteous" or "just." Choosing to accept Mary as his wife was the same as saying he was responsible for the child and worthy of the penalty of immediate marriage without option of divorce. The Gospel reports that Joseph further broke the rules by not consummating the marriage until Jesus was born.

The stories of Mary and Joseph remind us that the Bible records not only God's actions and will but also how human beings' interpretations; especially the human propensity for replacing relationship with a loving creator with religious rules. Some have suggested that the God of the Old Testament is a God of anger while the God of the New Testament is a God of love. Have you ever heard that? That claim is not only ridiculous, it is apostasy. It violates the most fundamental tenet of our faith—there is ONE God whose ultimate revelation is Jesus, God incarnate who demonstrated once and for all that divine love always breaks through human rules.

Light the last purple candle

CHRISTMAS EVE: The Light Shines in Darkness

John 1:1-14

Our Christmas celebrations are bright and shiny. Twinkling lights and glittering ornaments remind us that the Light of the world has come. However, by decorating the story, we may lose sight of the fact that the light shines *in darkness*.

While the story of Jesus' birth is miraculous and wonder-ful, it is a story that unfolds in the real world with real people who are a real family.

Not only are Joseph, Mary and Jesus a real family, they are a family that exists on the margins of society. They have suffered the consequences of violating the religious rules of the day. They are among the oppressed peoples who live under brutal Roman occupation. They are poor. When they go to the temple after the mother's time of purification to make sacrifice as required, they offer the lesser sacrifice that is allowed by Leviticus for those who can't afford the traditional offering. For at least a year, they are homeless refugees in a foreign land. And once they settle in Nazareth, Joseph works as a *tekton*, which means manual laborer.

This is the family into which Jesus was born: outcast, oppressed, poor and landless. And that makes perfect sense. The light shines not in the shiny places of power and wealth, but into the darkness of human sin, and into the experience of human exploitation and suffering. Where else would the light shine? How else would it change the world?

Light the Christ Candle

Tonight as we celebrate the light that has entered the darkness of the world, we mustn't forget that the darkness could not grasp that light. So as we express our joy in worship, we must allow ourselves to be filled with the light of Christ and leave these moments readied to be light to the world. Because it is joy, not just to me, not just to you, not just to those who gather for worship this holy night, but Joy to the *World*.