



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Advent Wreath and How is it used in worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

As Christians, we use symbols to express visually the basic tenets of our faith and as reminders of the pilgrimage of our life in Christ. Symbols can have heightened meaning for us when associated with particular seasons of that journey. One such symbol is the Advent wreath.

The Advent wreath has its roots in the pre-Christian practices of northern Europe. People sought the return of the sun in the dark time of the year (at the winter solstice) by lighting candles and fires. As early as the middle Ages, Christians used fire and light to represent Christ's coming into the world. Using this same symbolism, the Advent wreath developed a few centuries ago in Germany as a sign of the waiting and hopeful expectation of the return in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The wreath, a circle, came to represent the eternal victory over death through Jesus Christ. The evergreens were a sign of the faithfulness of God to God's people, even in death, and the lighted candles were a reminder of the light of Christ brought into the world.

This symbolism can be just as strong for us today. As is the case with all symbols, they speak most loudly to remind us of God's promises of life when they are drawn directly out of our daily experience and environment. One should consider using only natural materials from God's creation when making an Advent wreath. Evergreens come in many varieties and may be treated with a flame retardant substance. Branches of holly, laurel, and other green shrubs, which retain their freshness longer than pine, may also be used. The circular shape, a symbol of eternal life, is most important. Using an alternative shape, such as a log, would diminish the meaning of the symbol, which is no longer a circle. There is no one prescribed color for the candles, although several traditions are current. Four natural colored candles are always appropriate and symbolize the Light for which we wait. Four blue candles matches the blue used for the season, a color representing hope. (see also, ["What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?"](#)) Some assemblies may have the older tradition of using purple candles, keeping purple as the color for both Advent and Lent. The practice of using a pink candle on the third Sunday in Advent is no longer consistent with the current lectionary. This tradition arose when Advent was

regarded as a thoroughly penitential season much like Lent. The third Sunday of Advent was called “Gaudete Sunday”, from the Latin meaning “Rejoice!” It had its roots in the text from Philippians 4:4-6, “rejoice in the Lord always...” These readings are still heard in Year C on Advent III.

Liturgical renewal in the last decades of this century has shifted the focus of these four weeks to one of hope and expectation of the coming of the Christ. This hope looks forward not only to celebrating the child in the manger, but even more to Christ’s coming in glory at the end of time—a continuation of the eschatological emphasis of the last Sundays after Pentecost. Candles in rich royal blue are symbolic of this hope. Coincidentally, these two colors, purple and blue, have long been associated with the same ideas: the symbolic colors of royal blood and of longing; the natural colors of the dawn before the sun rises and the deep shades of midnight.

When determining the size of the Advent wreath, be mindful of your worship space so that the wreath is appropriate to that space. The wreath is not a primary symbol in the same way the font, table and ambo (lectern/pulpit) function, but it needs to be of sufficient size so that it makes a strong statement about the meaning of the season. It may be hung or placed on a table or stand but it is never put on the altar.

The Advent wreath may be lit before the service when other candles are lighted. It may also be lit at another point during the Gathering rite. Blessings for the Advent wreath may be found in *Sundays and Seasons*. Some assemblies like to accompany the lighting of the Advent wreath with an appropriate song. Consider using a different stanza of the same hymn, such as "Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah" each week (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #240).

The Advent wreath is also appropriate for daily use in home devotions. The making of the wreath can be a family activity, using materials gathered from the yard or garden. Resources for use of the Advent wreath in the home, including suggestions for assembling a wreath, are among those listed below.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?
- ☞ How does worship involve all of our senses?
- ☞ How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- ☞ *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- ☞ *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Briehl, Susan. *Come Lord Jesus: Devotions for the Home: Advent/Christmas/Epiphany*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
 - 💻 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com.
- 📖 O'Neal, Debbie Trafton. *The Advent Wreath: A Light in the Darkness*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989.
- 📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

Other Resources

- 📖 Nelson, Gertrude Mueller. [*To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration*](#). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986.
- 📖 Stookey, Laurence Hull. [*Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*](#). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

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