

4 S. in Advent 12/19/21
The Advent Wreath

This past week, I was asked an intriguing question: What does the Advent wreath mean? Which I thought was a great question. Because you know my favorite question to ask you, right? **Why?** Why do we do what we do?

This morning, I'm going to deviate from our normal practice of basing the sermon on one of the assigned Scripture readings for the Sunday and answer that question. In fact, you will find an insert in your bulletin so that you can follow along, or doodle on it, or make a paper airplane out of it, or hang it on your fridge so that when Advent rolls around next year, you can be reminded of what it symbolizes.

The Lord's Church and we, in our Christian life, use symbols, pictures, images. They are not relics that we worship; or some type of "good luck" charm that we trust in. To carry it one step further, I had a class I think was called "Visual Aids in Teaching and Learning," or something like that, and we learned that you remember 90% of what you see and only ... 10% of what you hear. Understanding that, the Church has long used symbols not only to teach the faith, but to remind us of the Gospel, and what sweet comfort it gives, especially as we live our days in this world of perversity.

For example, when the early Christians suffered grave persecutions under the Roman government, they sought safety in the catacombs under the city of Rome. And the most common Biblical scene they painted on the walls of those catacombs was ... Daniel in the lion's den. A visible reminder to them that just as God preserved Daniel, they trusted God would preserve them. Or perhaps my favorite of all time: your baptismal

certificate. There it is hanging on your bedroom wall so that it is the first thing you see every morning when you open your eyes and the last thing you see before closing your eyes in peaceful sleep, always reminding you that, in spite of what the world, the devil, and even your own despair says, you are God's own child!

Which brings us to the wreath and the season of Advent. Historically, Advent was a season of repentance and renewal. In more recent times, Advent has taken on the sense of longing, that Jesus is coming and we yearn for Him to come, to be with us. So, we use this time to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome Christ at His birth.

We can relate to that in this season. Think of it as kids and grandkids coming for Christmas. You long for them; you want to be with them! And you are busy preparing for them to come – putting up the tree and decorating; baking and cooking. So it is of our Lord Christ. We long to be with Him. The hymnwriter so eloquently captures the longing in our hearts and minds,

O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears
(LSB 357:1).

With that as a context of “why” we use an Advent wreath, let's look at the wreath itself.

The first thing that you notice is the circle. The circle represents God, that He is eternal. Just as a circle has no beginning and no end, so the eternal God has no beginning and no end. “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God,” the Psalmist says (Ps 90:1-2).

And, the Good News of the Christian faith is that our Lord Christ has opened the Kingdom of heaven to all believers, so that we will be forever with the eternal God. It's good for us to be reminded of that because death is such a part of our lives. Remember those ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday? Even though they are put on with the words, "From dust you are and to dust you shall return," we must never forget that God did not create us to die. Death is the curse of sin.

God did not want us to die, so He sent Christ to redeem us, to buy us back from sin, death, and the devil that we would be His very own and live with Him in heaven forever. The book of Revelation assures us, "The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God" (Re 21:3). And you know the words of the Psalmist, "I shall dwell in the house of the LORD ... **forever**" (Ps 23:6).

And around that circle is greenery, foliage. The color green symbolizes newness, renewal. When do things start to turn green in nature? Spring time. The long cold, hard, dreary days of winter are over. So, green in the Church means new life in Christ. We have died to sin and are freed from its tyranny. The long dark dreary days of sin and its wages of death are over.

By our baptism into Christ, we are grafted into the life-giving vine Jesus. Our Lord says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in Him, He it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). And as we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, we do as John the Baptist teaches, we "bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Lk 3:8). And the fruit of that repentance -- love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – is evident in our thoughts, words, and deeds (cf. Ga 5:22-23).

And we dare not overlook the RED that is with that greenery. On the Advent wreath there is some type of red berries, bows, or plant of some type. We may be tempted to think it's there because it looks pretty. Far from it, My Friends in Christ. Red symbolizes blood, the “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7b). And because that blood takes away the sin that separates us from God, we can spend eternity with God.

And of course – the candles. Four candles, four weeks of Advent, a candle for each week.

The first candle symbolizes HOPE. The Gospel reading for the 1st Sunday in Advent is always Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the donkey. Jesus is our Savior, who comes to us and, because He comes to be with us, we have hope.

The second candle symbolizes FAITH. This is the Sunday we meet John crying in the wilderness for us to repent, to turn in faith to Christ. We remember that repentance is not just being sorrow; yes, it is sorrow for sin and FAITH that God forgives us for the sake of Christ. Remember the red – the blood that cleanses us from all sin!

The third candle is the rose candle. Yes, it's really rose, but we typically call it pink in our neck of the woods. This candle is for Gaudette, “Rejoice,” Sunday. The reason for our rejoicing is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The fourth candle is the ANGEL candle, which points to the historic Gospel reading for this Sunday, our Gospel reading to today. The Angel

Gabriel comes to Mary with the news, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Lk 1:31).

And, the fifth candle is the Christ candle in the middle. White symbolizes the purity, the holiness of Christ. And you will notice that it is in the middle of that eternal circle, because Christ is the focus of our life and faith, today, and forever.

I close this morning with the most obvious thing of all, but what we must continually be reminded of: What do candles do? They give off light. Those burning candles are meant to recall the words of Jesus, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12). Living, moving, and having our being in Christ, our Lord says of us, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). The candlelight not only comforts us that Christ is our light in this darkness of this valley of the shadow of death; but reminds us that we are called to be the light of the world as we reflect Christ to others. He shines His light through us so that all the world may know **JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON.**

There you have it – the Advent Wreath. May you have a most joyous celebration of our Lord’s birth. Amen.