

Your Christmas Would Be Better with an Advent Wreath

Introduction

This time of year is so busy. Busy with lots of wonderful things, but busy none the less. Personal responsibilities, family customs, cultural practices... It is unlikely that you will be able to fit everything you want into your Christmas seasons. So, you better be purposeful about including the most important elements of Christmas. That is what the advent wreath helps me and my family do.



Advent means arrival. It can be used when referring to other arrivals, but most popularly, it is used to refer to the weeks leading up to the arrival, the birth, of Jesus Christ. Since the middle ages believers have used a wreath and candles to help remember, observe, and teach the true blessings of Christ's birth.

Traditionally, an advent wreath has 5 candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white). The wreath traditionally is made of evergreen cuttings, holly, pine cones, etc. However, you don't have to have an ideal advent wreath to benefit from this tradition. The advent wreath is just a prop or memory device, a physical element to focus our thoughts on the spiritual truths that are at the heart of Christmas.

Each week, we will appreciate various aspects of the symbolism of the advent wreath, but the advent wreath is not a sacred object, it is a teaching tool, a beautiful and peaceful teaching tool.

The candles on the wreath are usually lit on the Sundays leading up to Christmas, beginning 4 Sundays before Christmas. This is a good way to focus on the foundational truths of Christmas all throughout the season. However, don't get too hung up on the time line. If you start a week or two late, that is no problem. Even if you crunch it all into the week of Christmas, it is still time well spent.

I am going to share with you how my own family is using the advent wreath this year. Feel free to use this for yourself or your whole family. Use what you like, discard the rest, use your

creativity to make it your own, or look for additional ideas on-line. Our advent wreath observance changes from year to year, and what we are doing this year is influenced by past years, and many resources I have read, and ideas I have borrowed from other families' traditions.

Some people focus each of the four Sundays before Christmas on a certain person or group of people (example - Week 1 = Church Fathers, Week 2 = Prophets, Week 3 = John the Baptist, Week 4 = The Virgin Mary). I prefer to focus on key aspects of Christmas (example - Week 1 - Hope, Week 2 - Peace, Week 3 - Joy, Week 4 = Love).

That's enough background and table setting... let's get to celebrating!

Advent - Session 1 - Hope

My three sons, Hunter (14), Levi (13), Randol (11), and I (older than the three of them combined) sit in the living room with the advent wreath on the coffee table. No candles are lit. It's evening, and the sun goes down so early that as my wife turns out all the lights in the house we are soon sitting in almost complete darkness. I've got the brightness setting on my iPad down as low as it can go, and I begin to read.

Genesis 1:1-3 (NLT)

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

On cue, my wife, Vickie, lights 1 of the purple candles. Each week as another candle is lit, the wreath will be brighter and brighter, this is a symbol of Christ's arrival growing nearer.

Think of the power God displayed in that moment.
What words describe God's power?

We continue to read scriptures.

John 8:12 (NLT)

Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."



John 3:19b (NLT)

God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.

Let's pray. Dear, Heavenly Father. We thank You. When all is dark in the world, You are there. When we go through dark times, You are there. You bring light and hope to all. You call us, your followers, to shine Your light to those around us. Help us to shine Your light ever brighter. In Jesus name, Amen.

Over 800 years before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Isaiah recorded this prophecy, it was partially fulfilled in Jesus' first coming, and will be completely fulfilled in His next.

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NLT)

1Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.

2And the Spirit of the lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the lord.

3He will delight in obeying the lord.
He will not judge by appearance
nor make a decision based on hearsay.

4He will give justice to the poor
and make fair decisions for the exploited.
The earth will shake at the force of his word,
and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.

5He will wear righteousness like a belt
and truth like an undergarment.

6In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.

The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.

7The cow will graze near the bear.
The cub and the calf will lie down together.

The lion will eat hay like a cow.

8The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.

9Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so the earth will be filled with people who know the lord.

10In that day the heir to David's throne
will be a banner of salvation to all the world.

The nations will rally to him,
and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.

Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)

26In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. 28Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

29Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! 31You will conceive and give

birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. 33And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

34Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

35The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

36What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. 37For the word of God will never fail.”

38Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her.

Isaiah 7:10-14 (NLT)

10Later, the lord sent this message to King Ahaz: 11“Ask the lord your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want—as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead.”

12But the king refused. “No,” he said, “I will not test the lord like that.”

13Then Isaiah said, “Listen well, you royal family of David! Isn’t it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? 14All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).

Matthew 1:18-24 (NLT)

18This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. 19Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

20As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

22All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:

23“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!

She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means ‘God is with us.’”

24When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

God loves us so much, that although we live in a dark world, and struggle with the darkness of sin, God didn't want us to miss His light. So, God told us, hundred of years in advance, the miraculous events that point us to Jesus, the Light of the World. There is no reason not to recognize the light.

The promise of the Messiah gave hope to all the followers of God before Jesus was born. They placed their faith in God, and God promised to remove their sin from them. God kept His promise through Jesus. The Old Testament believer's hope was secure because their hope was in God, who was able to keep His promise.

God's people today place our faith in God as well. We are forgiven and returned to friendship with God because of what Jesus did for us. And because of what Jesus did in the past, we have a hope for a wonderful future. Not just in this life, but even more in eternity. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is the only hope for all people... past, present, and future.

Romans 15:12-13 (NLT)

12And in another place Isaiah said,
"The heir to David's throne will come,
and he will rule over the Gentiles.
They will place their hope on him."

13I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We ended by listening to Hope of the World by Hillsong Live. I played it from YouTube on my iPad. Here is a link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K71tuC_rQj0

Advent - Session 2 - Peace

In the front room around the coffee table holding the advent wreath. All the lights are off.
Reading from the iPad.

The circle of the wreath reminds us that God is eternal, without beginning and without end. The green of the wreath reminds us that God provides eternal life. The holly reminds us of the suffering Jesus went through so we could be forgiven.

Light the 1st purple candle. Light the 2nd purple candle.

Micah 5:2 (NLT)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.

Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11 (NLT)

1 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking,
2 "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."
9 After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.
10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!
11 They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.



Isaiah 2:1-5 (NLT)

1 This is a vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:
2 In the last days, the mountain of the lord's house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship.
3 People from many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the lord,

to the house of Jacob's God.
There he will teach us his ways,
and we will walk in his paths."
For the lord's teaching will go out from Zion;
his word will go out from Jerusalem.
4The lord will mediate between nations
and will settle international disputes.
They will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore.
5Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the lord!

Matthew 3:1-6 (NLT)

1In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, 2"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." 3The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said, "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the lord's coming! Clear the road for him!'" 4John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. 5People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. 6And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

Play a version of the song, It Is Well With My Soul, and read the lyrics.

It Is Well With My Soul

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,

That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

Advent - Session 3 - Joy

Lights are off as we sit around the advent wreath.

Psalm 30:5 (NLT)

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Light the 1st purple candle.

Light the 2nd purple candle.

Light the rose candle.

Isaiah 9:6-7 (NLT)

6For a child is born to us,

a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7His government and its peace
will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne
of his ancestor David
for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the lord of Heaven's
Armies

will make this happen!



John 1:19-34 (NLT)

19This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" 20He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah."

21"Well then, who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"

"No," he replied.

"Are you the Prophet we are expecting?"

"No."

22"Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?"

23John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,

'Clear the way for the lord's coming!'"

24Then the Pharisees who had been sent 25asked him, “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?”

26John told them, “I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. 27Though his ministry follows mine, I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.”

28This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Jesus, the Lamb of God

29The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30He is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.’ 31I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel.”

32Then John testified, “I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him. 33I didn’t know he was the one, but when God sent me to baptize with water, he told me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ 34I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NLT)

1For everything there is a season,
a time for every activity under heaven.
2A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
3A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
4A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
5A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
6A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
7A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
8A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.

Philippians 2:1-11 (NLT)

1Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? 2Then make me

truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

3Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. 4Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

5You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

6Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.

7Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,
8he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

9Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,

10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

We listened to the song Joy by Rend Collective. Here's a link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDiETOLBvxA>

Advent - Session 4 - Love

Sitting around the wreath in the dark.

Romans 5:8 (NLT)

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

Light the 1st purple candle.

Light the 2nd purple candle.

Light the rose candle.

Light the 4th purple candle.

Malachi 3:1-5 (NLT)

1“Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,” says the lord of Heaven’s Armies.

2“But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. 3He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the lord. 4Then once more the lord will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

5“At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the lord of Heaven’s Armies.



Romans 8:18-25 (NLT)

18Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. 19For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. 20Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, 21the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. 22For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of

childbirth right up to the present time. 23And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. 24We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. 25But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)

Isaiah 52:7-10 (NLT)

7How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who brings good news,
the good news of peace and salvation,
the news that the God of Israel reigns!
8The watchmen shout and sing with joy,
for before their very eyes
they see the lord returning to Jerusalem.
9Let the ruins of Jerusalem break into joyful song,
for the lord has comforted his people.
He has redeemed Jerusalem.
10The lord has demonstrated his holy power
before the eyes of all the nations.
All the ends of the earth will see
the victory of our God.

Revelation 21:1-4 (NLT)

1Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

We listened to this beautiful hymn, which was one of my favorites to listen to on the pipe organ at Moody Bible Institute chapel: Oh the Deep Deep Love of Jesus - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPXapFfesA>

Advent - Session 5 - Christ the Light of the World

Light 4 preceding candles. Light the center white candle.

Isaiah 9:1-6 (NLT)

1Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.

2The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.

For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.

3You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice.

They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing the plunder.

4For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders. You will break the oppressor's rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.

5The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned.

They will be fuel for the fire.

6For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.



Luke 2:1-20 (NLT)

1At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2(This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. 4And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient

home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. 5He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant.

6And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

The Shepherds and Angels

8That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

13Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

14"Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."

15When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, 19but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

John 1:1-18 (NLT)

1In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

2He existed in the beginning with God.

3God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.

4The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.

5The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

6God sent a man, John the Baptist, 7to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. 8John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about

the light. 9The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

10He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. 11He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. 12But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. 13They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

14So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

15John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"

16From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. 17For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

Titus 2:11-14 (NLT)

11For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. 12And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God, 13while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. 14He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds.

Listen to BeBe & CeCe Winans rendition of For Unto Us a Child Is Born: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXbBlh-hNZM>