



***He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.
The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
John 1:8-9***

The first time I saw an Advent wreath was at my Grandparent's house. At that point we did not light Advent candles as a part of my home congregation's practices, so they were the ones who first taught me about the meaning behind the wreath. It was explained that there was one candle for each of the four Sundays before Christmas, and each week, one was to be lit. The closer you get to Christmas day, to Jesus, the brighter the light shines.

I loved the idea of a visible countdown to Christmas as a child. But I have to admit as an adult, the Advent wreath still helps me prepare my heart for the coming of Christ. It's a visual reminder that there is light and hope in the darkness. That Christ has come. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

And certainly, this is nothing new. "It's said that the Advent wreath first appeared in Germany in 1839. As it is recorded, a Lutheran minister working at a mission for children created a wreath out of the wheel of a cart. He placed twenty small red candles and four large white candles inside the ring. The red candles were lit on weekdays and the four white candles were lit on Sundays.

Although many symbols have been attributed to it since that time, it was originally intended as a way to mark the Advent season and the weeks until Christmas. Together, families would light a candle for each past week and the current week at their dinner or evening time of prayer. The configuration of candles, whether in a line or a circle, did not matter. Neither did the color of the candles (all colors are used in homes in Europe). What mattered was the marking of time and the increase of light each week in the face of increasing darkness as the winter solstice approached.

However, as Advent wreaths began to be used by worshiping congregations on Sundays in some places in Europe and America, beginning in the late 19th century, adaptations were needed for the larger worship spaces. Candles needed to be bigger and more specialized than the "daily candles" handmade or purchased for home use. They also needed to be more uniform in color to fit with other decor in the sanctuary. Purple (and more recently blue) has become the basic color of the candles to coordinate with the color of the paraments used during this season.

And that's not all, as Advent wreaths changed from practical private use to the more symbolic context of public worship, it became important for the candles to have meaning rather than simply marking time and adding light. Soon ceremonies were developed around the lighting of the weekly candles; and themes of Joy, Hope, Peace, and Love became popular, based on scriptures from the lectionaries; and that is true even to today and the Advent customs that we follow."

Here at First Church I would venture to believe that the lighting of an Advent wreath has probably always been an important part of the Advent tradition. But that being said, it's also probably the first time in our history that pastors are lighting the candles in an empty sanctuary; and you are watching it as a part of our recorded worship. I miss the body of Christ being together and responding with song.

I miss the corporate journey that we've taken year after year as together we would add another flame to the wreath.

But I say this knowing from the wreath's history that it is a tradition that first began within the family home. So, with that being said, what if we intentionally expanded our Advent wreath lighting this year? What if it became more than what you are observing on your computer screen or TV? What if we were all perhaps a little more intentional about it within our families and homes and the symbolism that it holds?

Yes, I am suggesting this realizing we are stepping into the second week of Advent and one candle has already been lit; but after this week's questions and conversations, I want to encourage you to think about Advent in a new light this year. Why not share in your church family's tradition by incorporating a piece of it into your own? Why not pick a time every Sunday to gather – to pray – and to light that candle as a reminder of the light of Christ and the anticipation of His arrival? It doesn't have to be anything fancy – make or buy a wreath – carve out a piece of wood – use candle holders with greens placed around them – be creative. But then just imagine that glow spanning out and being even brighter as together we await the coming of the Christ Child.

To be honest, it's been my experience that it's easy to let the busy-ness of the Christmas season, and now the craziness of our world, distract us from what really matters. But I've found that being intentional about practicing Advent helps tune our hearts to sing the wonders of God's grace—grace that was revealed to us most fully in the coming of the Christ child. This year is a year where, I believe stronger than ever before, we need to stay focused, as well as intentional when it comes to our faith and to the season of Advent among us. Let's not let everything else drown it out or lighten its effect within our lives, and within our journey of faith. Let's be as deliberate and as purposeful as we can as we await that exciting news – the coming of the Christ child. If ever our world needed the announcement of his birth, this is the year, and these are the circumstances.

So, I hope you will consider a meaningful wreath of green within your family's tradition this year. Better yet, I hope you will make it a part of your own; if you haven't already. And if you do, I pray that as the light from your candles grows brighter each week, that it sparks conversations and questions about the hope we have in Christ, the peace He has created between us and God, the joy He has instilled in our hearts and the tremendous love He has shown. May that and so much more be your experience and your encouragement during this season of waiting.

Prayer for Lighting:

Some families enjoy saying prayers and blessings as they light a candle on the wreath each Sunday. Here is a prayer that can easily be used by many or even one.

Parent: Lord, you are the light of the world.

Child: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Parent: Heavenly Father, we long for your plan of rescue and redemption to be realized. Give us hearts that see Your beauty and wait in hope for You to make all things good and new again.

Child: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Parent: May Your light and grace shine brightly in our hearts, spreading joy, hope, peace and love to those around us.

All: Amen.