



## What is an Advent Wreath?

I love the first Sunday of the Christmas season. With Thanksgiving over, all attention turns to the coming of Christmas. Unsuspecting churchgoers stumble into church and are jolted into the season by a sanctuary transformed by Christmas decorations—poinsettias, wreaths, bows, white lights, and the Advent wreath.

I remember fondly watching the traditions of the Advent wreath unfold as child. Each Sunday, a different family would parade to the front of the sanctuary to light one of the candles and read a short verse and liturgy. This ritual seemed significant, but truth be told, I never really understood the meaning behind the symbol. Does that sound familiar? Do you wonder what Advent wreaths are really all about?

### **When did people start using Advent wreaths?**

Today, Advent wreaths are clearly a Christian tradition, but they were likely adapted from pre-Christian, Germanic and Scandinavian practices. In the deep darkness of winter, many people in pre-Christian Europe placed round evergreen wreaths or wheels fitted with candles on their tables to remind themselves that light would once again come with the lengthening days of Spring. By the Middle Ages, Christians began incorporating Advent wreaths into their Christmas celebrations, and by the 16th century both Lutherans and Catholics had set practices for using Advent wreaths in worship.

### **What does the wreath represent?**

Advent wreaths are composed of two main parts: the round evergreen wreath and typically four or five

candles. The wreath lies horizontally, either on a table or stand, and its round shape symbolizes the unending love of God. An Advent wreath is always made of some kind of evergreen garland—holly, pine, laurel, cedar, etc. Each kind of evergreen represents a slightly different meaning, but generally, the use of evergreen signifies everlasting life—the life Christians enjoy because Christ came to dwell among his people so long ago.

### **What about the candles?**

The number, names, and meanings of the candles in an Advent wreath differ depending on traditions, denominations, and churches. In the Western Church, most Advent wreaths have either four or five candles, one candle for each of the four weeks of Advent and often a fifth candle which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Each candle represents a theme and is coupled with scripture and liturgy. Lighting these candles symbolizes our preparation for the arrival of the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. Below is one common interpretation of the meaning and purpose of each candle.

### **What is the meaning of each candle?**

The first candle, called the *Prophecy Candle*, is purple and symbolizes hope. It is lit on the first Sunday of Advent and is often accompanied by the reading of prophetic scriptures about the birth of the Messiah and the hope he would bring to the world. The second candle is called the *Bethlehem Candle*, and it is also purple. This candle is lit on the second Sunday of Advent and symbolizes either faith or peace and recalls the journey toward the nativity. The third candle is called the *Shepherd's Candle* and is a rose color. This candle represents joy and is often linked with scripture about John the Baptist. The fourth candle is called the *Angel's Candle*, and returns to the color purple. This candle represents love and is connected with scripture related to the annunciation of Christ, often the Song of Mary ([Luke 1:46-55](#)). The fifth candle, the *Christ Candle*, is typically white. It is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas day and represents the spotless life of Christ and the light that his birth brought into the world. In corporate worship, this candle is often used to start the lighting of congregations' candles for the Christmas Eve or Christmas day candlelight services.

### **How can you use an Advent wreath?**

Advent wreaths are often used in formal church worship. However, many families use Advent wreaths in their homes. You can buy or make your own Advent wreath (Pinterest is full of ideas!) and light the candles with family and friends. There are many different Advent liturgies and scripture readings [online](#) that you can adapt and use at home.

Whether you use an Advent wreath in your church or home, it helps ground you in the anticipation of the Advent season. Lighting a candle each week reminds us how God's people have always longed for his coming light. Just as people longed for his first coming 2000 years ago, so we long for the time when he will come again and his light will shine in its fullness for all time!

Would you like to focus your heart on the coming Christ more fully in the Advent season? Check out the [Waiting in Expectation](#) devotional series from *Today*.

[For more on Advent, visit our Advent Resource Page.](#)

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