

ADVENT: THE JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS

HOW TO CELEBRATE ADVENT WITH AN ADVENT WREATH



Advent (from Latin, *adventus*, meaning “coming towards”) is a four-week season of preparation for Christmas. The First Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the church’s year. Advent and Christmas both focus on the *past*—the coming of Jesus as an infant born into poverty in Bethlehem, and the *future*—the coming of Christ in glory to fulfill God’s loving purposes for humanity. This past and future orientation is reflected in the readings appointed in the church for each Sunday of Advent.

From ancient times, one way to celebrate Advent—not only in church but also at home—is by lighting candles on an *Advent wreath*. The wreath was widely used in northern Europe long before Christianity as a symbol of life and hope. Made of evergreens, it symbolized the circle of the year that would turn from winter to spring, from shadows to light. During the Middle Ages, Christians adopted this symbol and reinterpreted its meaning: the lighted candles symbolized the light of Christ shining in the night, and the evergreens represented the new life that Christ brings into the world.

The Advent wreath is placed on a table or other surface. Four candles are placed inside or next to the greens in a circle; a fifth candle (the “Christ candle”) is at the center.

The first four candles correspond to the four Sundays of Advent: they are lit Saturday or Sunday night and can be relighted with an appropriate prayer before the evening meal on any day of the week, or during a time of private prayer at the end of the day. The “Christ candle” is lit Christmas Eve and can be relighted along with the four Advent candles on any or all of the subsequent Twelve Nights of Christmas until Epiphany (January 6).

Three of the candles are purple—symbolizing the sovereignty of Christ. One candle is pink or rose—symbolizing the light of early dawn. The Christ candle is white—symbolizing daylight and celebration.

Some churches use blue as the Advent color: blue is the traditional color of Mary, and symbolizes the night sky as it lightens towards dawn.

Here are five brief services for lighting the candles: one for each Sunday of Advent, and one for Christmas Eve or Christmas Night. The service can be used by one person, or a family, or a group of friends. The Prayer provided for each Sunday may be used on the following days if the candles are lit before an evening meal, or at a time of prayer in the evening. We provide the text of a hymn with each service, which can either be read in unison as poetry or sung. You can find the music in *The New Century Hymnal* which can be ordered from United Church Resources at 1-800-537-3394.



YOU'RE WELCOME TO JOIN US FOR OUR LIVE ADVENT WREATH LIGHTING SERVICE AT 9 P.M. (EASTERN) EVERY NIGHT AT I.UCC.ORG. JUST CLICK ON "GATHER IN OUR REAL-TIME PRAYER CHAPEL" TO PARTICIPATE.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THEME: HOPE

Introduction

Today [*or* Tonight] is the beginning of Advent—the time of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

We are here because God’s promises to our ancestors came true when Jesus was born.

God’s promise is kept each Sunday when we worship because Christ is in our midst. God will keep the promise to come again in glory.

Reading from the Bible

Isaiah 60:2

For night shall cover the earth,
and thick shadows the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and God’s glory will appear over you.

Lighting of the First Candle

We light this candle to proclaim the coming of the light of God into the world.

With the coming of this light there is *hope*.

Because of Christ we not only have hope, but we believe that good is stronger than evil.

God wants us to work for good in this world.

The color of this candle is purple—symbolizing the majesty of Christ, whose glory shines in the night.

Light one purple candle.

Prayer

O God, we thank you
that Jesus brought hope into our world.
By the good news of the Bible
you are still bringing hope to people.
Help us to be ready to welcome Jesus
Christ, so that we may think good
thoughts and do good deeds
and so we may be a people of hope in our
world.

All reply

Amen!

Hymn 111

O Loving Founder of the Stars

O loving founder of the stars,
to all of faith light without end,
O Christ, redeemer of us all,
to earnest prayers your mercy lend.

Who grieving at the cry of pain—
the anguish of our dying race—
Did death itself for us destroy,
and guilt assume through loving grace.

As Savior from the heavens forth,
when earth draws near its final hour,
You from the virgin mother's womb
appeared in love’s redeeming power.

O Christ, who braved earth’s deepest
pain,
all kneeling low your name adore;
All heaven and earth your name confess
and praise you, Sovereign, evermore.

Tune: Conditor Alme
The New Century Hymnal
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SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THEME: PEACE

The first candle should be lit before the service begins.

Introduction

We gather around the Advent wreath today knowing that we are not perfect—that we all make mistakes and do bad things.

Only Jesus obeyed God fully. Jesus helps us to live as God wants us to live. Jesus gives us peace.

Reading from the Bible

Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child has been born for us,
an heir given to us.
Authority rests upon the shoulders
of the One who is named Wonderful
Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace,
whose authority shall grow continually;
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David
and for David's kingdom,
established and upheld with justice
and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Lighting of the Candle

We light this candle to proclaim
the coming of the light of God into the
world.

With the coming of this light there is
peace, for Christ is called the “Prince of
Peace.”

Christ's name is also Emmanuel, “God
with us.”

The presence of Christ with us
gives us peace day by day.

The color of this candle is purple—
symbolizing the majesty of Christ,
whose throne will endure forever.

Light the second purple candle.

Prayer

Eternal God, we thank you that through
all the years you have given peace to your
people.

Help us to have your peace in our lives.

We pray that, in this Advent season,
we may, by what we do, show your
presence to the sick, to the hungry,
and to the lonely,
so that they too may have peace.

All reply

Amen!

Hymn 101

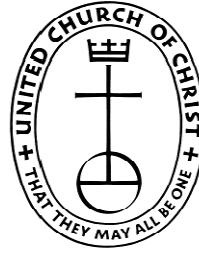
Comfort, Comfort O My People

“Comfort, comfort O my people,
tell of peace,” thus says our God;
comfort those whose hearts are shrouded,
mourning under sorrow’s load.
Speak unto Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them;
Tell them that their sins I cover,
and their warfare now is over.

For the herald's voice is calling
in the desert far and near,
Bidding us to make repentance
since the realm of God is here.
Oh, that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way;
Let the valleys rise in meeting
and the hills bow down in greeting.

Straight shall be what long was crooked,
and the rougher places plain!
Let your hearts be true and humble,
for Messiah's holy reign.
For God’s glory evermore
shall be known o’er all the world;
And all flesh shall see the token
that God's word is never broken.

Tune: Psalm 42 (Freu Dich Sehr)
The New Century Hymnal
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“Advent: The Journey to Christmas” was developed by the Congregational Vitality Initiative, United Church of Christ, with the assistance of the Worship and Education Ministry Team, Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ.

Visit i.UCC.org and www.ucc.org/worship for more resources for personal prayer and meditation.

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THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THEME: JOY

*The two candles lit on previous Sundays
are relighted before the service begins.*

Introduction

Soon we shall celebrate the birth of Jesus.
We worship God with joy in our hearts
as we are reminded of the words the angel
said on that first Christmas Day:
“Behold, I bring you good news of a great
joy which will come to all the people!”

Reading from the Bible

John 15:9-11

Jesus said: “As the Father has loved me,
so I have loved you; abide in my love.
If you keep my commandments,
you will abide in my love,
just as I have kept God’s commandments
and abide in God’s love.
I have said these things to you
so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.”

Lighting of the Candle

We light this candle to proclaim
the coming of the light of God into the
world.

With the coming of this light there is *joy*,
joy that is ours not only at Christmas but
always.

The color of the candle is rose—
the color of the sky
when dawn breaks into the night.

Light the pink candle in the wreath.

Prayer

O Holy One, as Christmas draws near,
there is a sense of excitement in the air.
We can feel a joy in our lives
and see it in those around us.
Still, for some of us this is a sad time
because of unhappy things that have
happened in our lives.
Help us to have that joy
that does not depend on earthly
happiness, but on you.
Help us to be filled with your joy
so that we may share it with a joyless
world.

All reply

Amen!

Hymn 117

Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates

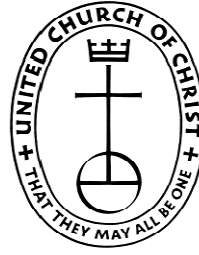
Lift up your heads, O mighty gates;
behold the glorious Ruler waits!
The Sovereign One is drawing near;
the Savior of the world is here.

Fling wide the portals of your heart;
make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come! I open wide
my heart to you; here, Christ, abide!
Let me your inner presence feel;
your grace and love to me reveal.

So, come my Sovereign; enter in!
Let new and nobler life begin;
Your Holy Spirit guide us on,
until the glorious crown be won.

Tune: Truro
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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THEME: LOVE

The three candles lit on previous Sundays are relighted before the service begins.

Introduction

As we gather around the Advent wreath tonight, we rejoice that Christmas is a time of prayer and of open hearts when we sing songs of joy.

Christmas is a time of worship—the moment when the busiest of us pause in wonder.

Christmas happens when God comes to us in love through Jesus Christ and fills us with love for all humankind.

Reading from the Bible

First Letter of John 4:9-11

God's love was revealed among us in this way:

God sent God's only Child into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Child to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Lighting of the Candle

We light this candle to proclaim the coming of the light of God into the world.

With the coming of this light is *love*.

Such great love helps us to love God and one another.

The color of this candle is purple—symbolizing the majesty of Christ, who rules in the power of love.

Light the last purple candle in the wreath.

Prayer

O God, we thank you that Jesus showed your love for every person—babies and children, old people and young, sick people and those who were strong, rich people and those who were poor. Come to us as Christmas approaches and let love be born in our hearts as you were born into the world on Christmas Day.

Hymn 104

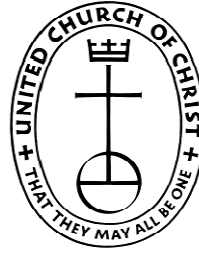
We Hail You God's Anointed

We hail you God's anointed,
the long-awaited One!
Hail in the time appointed,
your reign on earth begun!
You come to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

You shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;
and joy and hope, like flowers,
spring in your path to birth.
Before you on the mountains
shall peace, the herald, go,
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

The wise shall bow before you
and gold and incense bring;
all nations shall adore you,
and praise all peoples sing;
The tide of time shall never
your covenant remove;
your name shall stand forever,
your changeless name of Love.

Tune: Ellacombe
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CHRISTMAS EVE OR CHRISTMAS DAY

THEME: GOOD NEWS

The candles remain unlighted at the beginning of the service.

Introduction

On this Christmas Eve [Day, Night] we are gathered as God's people to celebrate again what Christ's coming means to the world.

We join with Christians all over the world who are celebrating on this holy night [day].

Readings from the Bible

Choose any or all of these readings. Each may be read by a different person.

Isaiah 9:6

For a child has been born for us,
an heir given to us.
Authority rests upon the shoulders
of the One who is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Luke 2:10,14

The angel said to [the shepherds],
"Do not be afraid; for see—
I am bringing you good news
of great joy for all the people."

Romans 5:5

Hope does not disappoint us,
because God's love has been poured into
our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been
given to us.

Lighting of the Candles

Tonight [Today] we relight the four Advent candles and recall what the Good News means.

Light each candle to the words "Hope," "Peace," "Joy," "Love."

Jesus Christ is the greatest gift who makes all these other gifts real. So, we light the Christ candle now, as we think about what Christ's coming means to each one of us.

The color of the candle is white—symbolizing the light of day and the light that Christ shines into the world.

Now light the Christ candle.

Prayer

We thank you, God,
for your gift of Jesus Christ to the entire world.

We thank you that Christ's coming makes hope, peace, joy and love possible for every person in every nation.

Encourage us to do our part to bring good will and peace to our families, our churches, our neighborhood, our world.

Now let your Spirit put us in touch with you, the living God, through the celebration of Christmas.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, through whom you give us all good things.

All reply

Amen!

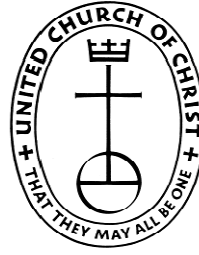
Hymn 140

Break forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,
and usher in the morning;
O shepherds shudder not in fright,
but hear the angel's warning.
"This child, now weak in infancy,
our confidence and joy shall be,
the power of Satan breaking,
our peace eternal making."

Come, dearest child, into our hearts,
and leave your crib behind you!
Let this be where the new life starts
for all who seek and find you.
To you this honor, thanks, and praise,
for all your gifts this time of grace;
Come conquer and deliver
this world, and us, forever.

Tune: Ermuntre Dich
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