

ON CELEBRATING ADVENT

People from different religious backgrounds have very different reactions to the observance of the church calendar. The church year is an ancient system that keeps the themes of Christian worship centered in celebration of the life and ministry of Jesus. There are two cycles, a *Christmas cycle* that moves from Advent and Christmas to the remembrance of Jesus Transfiguration, and an *Easter cycle*, that moves from Lent and Easter to the feast of Pentecost. The season that is fast approaching is called Advent that simply means coming. Some grow up in churches where Advent is observed, but with little to no real explanation. In such cases, Advent may seem like an empty, meaningless ritual.

On the other hand, some grow up in church traditions where Advent is not observed at all. These folks may think this observance as, at best, a hollow custom, or, at worst, quite foreign to authentic Christianity. As a matter of fact, many who grew up in church have the same the question as those who didn't: "What *is* Advent, anyway?"

THE MEANING OF ADVENT

Advent's origin is hidden in the early centuries of church history, but we do know that it originated as a time of preparation. Advent is a word that means "coming" or "arrival." It is a four-week period in which the church remembers the promises of Jesus' first coming, and looks forward to his promise to come again. Just as John the Baptist told the Jewish people to "prepare" for the Lord's coming, we need to encourage each other to be ready for his coming again.

The Christian Church has observed a Christmas season since the 4th century. There was always a period of preparation before Christmas Day, which varied from between 3 to 7 weeks. In the 10th century the 4-week pattern was finally settled (so we've only been doing this for a millennium)! European Christians used greenery and candles to enhance the season, and that practice has caught on in America and around the world in recent years.

The Advent wreath itself is a tradition that is centuries old. A candle is lit during and for each week until Christmas Eve when all 5 candles are lit. Three of the candles are purple, which is a penitential color, i.e. a symbol of self-examination and preparation. They remind us that, just as the prophets and John the Baptist called Israel to "get ready for the Lord," we need to be doing the same thing! The first candle is the candle of hope and expectation while the remaining three are organized around characters or themes as a way to unfold the story. For instance, the pink candle for the third week of Advent symbolizes the unbridled joy at the Advent of Christ. The central white candle, the "Christ candle," is lit on Christmas Eve. This reminds us that it is not all "preparation" – he really came, and will really come again. Every time we sing a Christmas carol, give and receive a gift, decorate a tree, hang a wreath, we are saying that God began something during that first Christmas and that He will complete it at His Second Coming.

An aspect of Advent as a season of preparation, is traditionally focused on repentance. Speaking biblically, to repent means to take our hearts off the things that drive, define and delight us and put them on Jesus. As 16th century reformer Martin Luther taught, the Christian life in its totality is a life of repentance. Beginning when we first commit our lives to Christ, and continuing throughout our lives, we are increasingly turning away from sin and self-centeredness and captivated by the love and beauty of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Even though a repentant spirit should mark all we do, it is still appropriate that certain times be set aside for a particular focus on repentance.

Advent should be a time for focusing on the heart, a time for asking questions about our spiritual health:

- What are the ways that I live as if Jesus never came, as if I have no Lover, no Savior, no Inheritance?
- What drives, defines and delights me more than Jesus? Why am I lacking unbridled joy? What is it that I honestly believe that I need to be happy and satisfied apart from or in addition to Jesus?

- What difference would it make in my life if I truly believed that Jesus came for us?
- Am I expecting Him to do anything in my life?

This season is the spiritual equivalent of an annual physical exam; it's a time to take stock of our lives, our hearts.

SHOULD WE OBSERVE ADVENT?

I am sometimes asked why churches should observe Advent at all. Well, it is true that any celebration in the life of the church can become simply exercises in repetition without reality. Consequently, many churches (including some Presbyterian churches) do not observe the season. There are, however, two good reasons for keeping this tradition:

First, this is a *wise* tradition. Realizing that repentance and longing should characterize the totality of the Christian life, we should see the practical wisdom in setting aside time especially for this purpose. Just as a baseball player may work at staying in shape year round but still give special attention to conditioning before the start of spring training, so we may find great spiritual benefits in setting aside a few weeks to give special attention to the state of our souls.

Second, it is right that we *honor* the traditional wisdom of the church, and Advent is a tradition that the church has observed for centuries. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has been present throughout church history, guiding God's people into an ever-increasing awareness of biblical truth, we believe that it is arrogant and foolhardy to disregard history, constantly attempting to "reinvent the wheel." We dishonor our spiritual ancestors when we casually disregard their wisdom.

Are Christians required to observe Advent? Strictly speaking, no. Presbyterians have long emphasized that our consciences are bound to Scripture alone, and there is no biblical mandate to celebrate Advent. But countless generations of Christians have found that seasons such as Advent/Christmas and Holy Week/Easter are wonderful opportunities to rekindle the devotional life, and especially to focus on the quality of our relationship with the One who came for us.

HOW CAN I (& MY FAMILY) ENJOY ADVENT?

Traditionally, it is observed in four basic (and often overlapping) ways:

Celebration. The overwhelming emphasis in Advent is unbridled joy. First, we don't celebrate a day but a Person who came. The day we celebrate could have been any day but historically, December 25th was chosen because it had been marked by Pagan celebrations. Most scholars believe that that date was derived from rites held by pre-Christian Germanic and Celtic people who celebrated winter solstice.

Many have objected to any celebration of Christmas because of these origins. Also, the things that we use in celebrating Christmas (e.g. holly, mistletoe, trees, etc.) are derived from the pagan customs and celebrations. For some, this is a further reason for rejecting this season. Yet, the use of these customs and traditions is a wonderful statement about the Advent of our Lord: He won! All of creation belongs to Him and gives him glory. The same glory that the angels could not contain at his birth is released all around us.

Secondly, have fun! Charles Dickens wrote that it's good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when it's mighty Founder was a child Himself. Would we dare to be a child this season? Would we, could we, drop our sophistication, our maturity and be captivated with a sense of wonder and awe? The God of all creation came because he loved YOU! Would you be "silly" this season? In the words of Steve Brown, don't forget to dance, have fun and laugh. It pleases God and makes you feel better.

Self-examination. This is a subordinate and often neglected aspect of the traditional Advent observance. Use this time to ask yourself some hard questions about your spiritual life, your spiritual maturity. Why did Jesus have to come? And, why did he come in the way he did? What does that say about me and how I relate to those around me? If you're married, ask your spouse to give you his or her evaluation of your spiritual health. Many Christians have a Christian friend, or a small group of fellow believers, who have agreed to hold them accountable. If you don't have an accountability group or partner, now might be a good time to initiate such a relationship. Parents—especially fathers—could use Advent as time to spend more time with their children individually, trying to understand their particular spiritual struggles and providing them encouragement. This should create within us both a longing to be free from our sin and a joyous, almost giddy, expectation that that day is drawing near!

Acts of compassion. This joy should/must “spill over” into the lives of those around you. The Advent season is a particularly appropriate time to ask God to fill you with compassion for the poor and oppressed and to put this into practice in concrete ways. If God could come to the social, religious and moral outcast, then we too should be moved with compassion.

There are many ways in which families can practice compassion during Advent. In your neighborhood, there may be a poor family you could help (with or without drawing attention to yourselves). You can adopt a family through the mercy ministry of our church. Or maybe you know an older person who lives alone who could use some help around the house—or would simply like having a friend. Be creative!! God certainly was that first Christmas. So, you are invited to think outside the box and your comfort zone. Advent can be an excellent opportunity to help us all escape from the manufactured joy that we so easily settle for.

Using the means of grace. Finally, the Advent season is a time for renewing our focus on the means of grace—a focus that all-too-easily fades when not given adequate attention. Historically, the church has said there are three means of grace—three instruments through which God helps us grow to be more and more like Christ: the Scriptures, prayer, and the sacraments.

If regular times of prayer and Bible study have never been a part of your life (or if they once were but have become less so) then Advent is a wonderful opportunity to begin these life-changing practice. There are scores of lectionaries and Bible-reading plans out there; talk with a pastor or mature Christian to help you find one right for you; there are also many helpful aids for developing a consistent life of prayer. The Advent season would also be a good time to get involved in a small group—a practice that generations of Christians have commended as key to their spiritual growth. And if your family doesn’t have a time of worship together, there is no better time to start—and then keep going the rest of the year!

In our individualistic culture, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that Christianity is a *communal* faith, that the center of Christian life is not private religious devotion but corporate worship, gathering with fellow believers to sing, pray, and receive Holy Communion. There are many today who identify themselves as Christians but for whom the church is peripheral and tangential. If this sounds like you, then use this season

to commit yourself to the community of God’s people. If you are a follower of Christ and yet have never been baptized, then make every effort to be baptized as soon as possible. If you have been baptized, remember that in baptism you were incorporated into a community, the family of God, and that you are to join in the family meal, the Eucharist. And parents, this season is a wonderful time to help your children realize that the church is their family, that worship is their first duty and greatest joy. And if your children understand the gospel, then this season could be a wonderful time to take the steps toward having them admitted to the Lord’s Table.

As Advent begins this year, my prayer for you is that this would be a truly blessed season, a time of genuine and significant spiritual growth for you and for your family. May God grant you a truly joyous Advent.