

Advent Meaning and Traditions Resource.

What Does Advent Mean?

In Christianity, Advent refers to the period of four weeks leading up to Christmas. It begins on the Sunday closest to November 30 (St. Andrew's Day) and ends on December 24. It is a time of anticipation and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day.

Some people may know that the Advent season focuses on expectation and think it serves as an anticipation of Christ's birth in the season leading up to Christmas. This is part of the story, but there's more to Advent.

The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival," which translates to the Greek word *parousia*. Scholars believe that during the 4th and 5th centuries in Spain and Gaul, Advent was a season of preparation for the baptism of new Christians at the January feast of Epiphany, the celebration of God's incarnation represented by the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:1), his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist (John 1:29), and his first miracle at Cana (John 2:1). During this season of preparation, Christians would spend 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration; originally, there was little connection between Advent and Christmas.

By the 6th century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But the "coming" they had in mind was not Christ's first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. The Advent season was not explicitly linked to Christ's first coming at Christmas until the Middle Ages.

What Does Advent Symbolize?

Advent symbolizes the church's present situation in these "last days" (Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:2) as God's people wait for the return of Christ in glory to consummate his eternal kingdom. The church is in a similar situation to Israel at the end of the Old Testament: in exile, waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel looked back to God's past gracious actions on their behalf in leading them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and on this basis, they called for God once again to act for

them. In the same way, the church, during Advent, looks back upon Christ's coming in celebration while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when he returns for his people.

In this light, **the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"** perfectly represents the church's cry during the Advent season:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

While Israel would have sung the song in expectation of Christ's first coming, the church now sings the song to commemorate the first coming and expects the second coming in the future.

Advent Liturgical Traditions and Celebrations.

To balance the two elements of remembrance and anticipation, the first two Sundays in Advent (through December 16th) look forward to Christ's second coming, and the last two Sundays look backward to remember Christ's first coming. Over the course of the four weeks, Scripture readings move from passages about Christ's return in judgment to Old Testament passages about the expectation of the coming Messiah to New Testament passages about the announcements of Christ's arrival by John the Baptist and the Angels.

One catechism describes Advent spirituality beautifully: "When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming. By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'"

Different Christian denominations may have variations in how they observe Advent, but here are some common traditions and practices associated with the holiday season:

Advent Wreath: Lighting candles on an Advent wreath is a common practice. The wreath typically has four candles, each representing one of the four weeks of Advent. A new candle is lit on each Sunday leading up to Christmas.

Advent Calendar: Many families and churches use Advent calendars to count down the days until Christmas. These calendars often have small doors or pockets that conceal a treat or a small item to be opened each day in December.

Scripture Readings: Reading passages from the Bible that focus on the prophecy and anticipation of the Messiah is a common Advent tradition. This can include readings from the Old Testament, particularly from the book of Isaiah.

Prayer and Reflection: Advent is a time for spiritual reflection and prayer. Many Christians use this season to prepare their hearts for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Some churches may have special Advent prayer services or devotional guides for personal reflection.

Jesse Tree: The Jesse Tree is a symbolic way of recounting the genealogy of Jesus, starting from Jesse, the father of King David. Each day, a different ornament or symbol is added to a tree or wreath, representing key figures and events from the Old Testament that led to the birth of Jesus.

Acts of Kindness and Charity: Advent is also seen as a time of giving and helping others. Many Christians engage in acts of kindness, charity, or volunteer work during this season.

Christmas Hymns: Singing hymns and carols that focus on the themes of Advent and Christmas is a common tradition. Many churches have special musical performances or choir presentations during Advent.

Nativity Scenes: Setting up a nativity scene at home or in church is a tradition that helps focus on the central story of Christmas—the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Advent Readings and Themes for Each Week.

Advent readings are themed Scripture readings for each Sunday of Advent. In many churches and homes, a candle is lit on each Sunday while Scripture is read. The four weeks of Advent are broken down into the themes:

First Week, Candle of Hope: Isaiah 9

Second Week, Peace Candle: Isaiah 40

Third Week, Joy (or Shepherd's Candle) : Matthew 2

Fourth Week, Love Candle: John 3

One of the beautiful things about the Advent readings above is that they allow churches to include both young and old in their services. The same can be true of private family devotions around the Advent wreath. By this point, you've probably realized there are no set criteria for who should read the Advent readings in church. In some denominations, the lead pastor or worship leader may read the Advent reading to lead the congregation in worship.

Advent Wreaths and Candles.

The Advent wreath first appeared in Germany in 1839. 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.

Eventually, the Advent wreath was created out of evergreens, symbolizing everlasting life in the midst of winter and death. The circle reminds us of God's unending love and the eternal life He makes possible. Advent candles are often nestled in the evergreen wreath. Additional decorations, like holly and berries, are sometimes added. Their red colour points ahead to Jesus' sacrifice and death. Pinecones can symbolize the new life that Jesus brings through His resurrection. Families begin lighting a candle on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and light another candle each subsequent Sunday.

The most common Advent candle tradition, however, involves four candles. A new candle is lit on each of the four Sundays before Christmas. Each candle represents something

different, although traditions vary. The four candles traditionally represent hope, faith, joy, and peace. Often, the first, second, and fourth candles are purple; the third candle is rose-coloured. Sometimes all the candles are red; in other traditions,

all four candles are blue or white. Occasionally, a fifth white candle is placed in the middle and is lit on Christmas Day to celebrate Jesus' birth.

What is an Advent Calendar?

The Advent calendar tradition seemingly dates to the 1850s. The calendar typically includes 24 doors or boxes to open, one for every day in December leading up to Christmas Day. Advent calendars, which can take various forms, are used by many families and individuals as a daily countdown to Christmas, with the small doors or compartments that reveal a surprise or piece of chocolate each day, further building anticipation for the holiday. However, the Advent calendar has a much deeper purpose and significance than just a treat.

An Advent calendar is a unique calendar used to help us countdown to December 25th: The celebration of the birth of Jesus. Advent calendars range between 22 and 28 days, depending on the day of the week for Christmas.

We count down to the celebration of the first Advent because we have a set day on the calendar since it has already occurred. We commemorate the birth of Jesus on December 25. Although it's doubtful that December 25th was Jesus' actual birthday, it's traditionally selected to remember and reflect on the birth of our Lord and Savior.

Advent Prayer.

Prayer is a beautiful way to help cut away from distractions of the season and open your heart to prepare for the joy and hope of Christ's birth. Here is a sample prayer to use during the season to focus your heart and mind on the birth of Jesus Christ.

This Advent, Lord, come to the manger of my heart.

Fill me with Your presence from the very start.

As I prepare for the holidays and gifts to be given,

Remind me of the gift You gave when You sent Your Son from Heaven.

The first Christmas gift was the greatest gift ever.
You came as a baby born in a manger.
Wrapped like the gifts I find under my tree,
Waiting to be opened, to reveal Your love to me.
Restore to me the wonder that came with Jesus' birth,
When He left the riches of Heaven and wrapped Himself in rags of earth.
Immanuel, God with us, your presence came that night.
And angels announced, "Into your darkness, God brings His Light."
"Do not be afraid," they said to shepherds in the field.
Speak to my heart today, Lord, and help me to yield.
Make me like those shepherd boys, obedient to Your call.
Setting distractions and worries aside, to You I surrender them all.
Surround me with Your presence, Lord, I long to hear Your voice.
Clear my mind of countless concerns and all the holiday noise.
Slow me down this Christmas, let me not be in a rush.
In the midst of parties and planning, I want to feel Your hush.
This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart.
Invade my soul like Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part.
Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day.
Keep me close to You, Lord. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray. Amen.

~Renee Swope, "The Manger of My Heart" from Proverbs 31 Ministries

Why Do Christians Celebrate Advent?

While Advent is certainly a time of celebration and anticipation of Christ's birth, it is more than that. It is only in the shadow of Advent that the miracle of Christmas can be fully understood and appreciated, and it is only in the light of Christmas that the Christian life makes any sense.

It is between the fulfilled promise of Christ's first coming and the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of his second coming that Karl Barth penned these words: "Unfulfilled and fulfilled promise are related to each other, as are dawn and sunrise. Both promise and in fact the same promise. If anywhere at all, then it is precisely in the light of the coming of Christ that faith has become Advent faith, the expectation of future revelation. But faith knows for whom and for what it is waiting. It is fulfilled faith because it lays hold on the fulfilled promise."

The promise for Israel and the church is Jesus Christ; The Lord has come to earth and will arrive again. This is the essence of Advent.

Author: Justin Holcomb is an Episcopal priest and teaches theology at Reformed Theological Seminary and Knox Theological Seminary.