



PILLAR CHURCH

Advent Celebration Guide

Introduction:

Every year during the Christmas season, someone in almost every church that I have ever participated in has stood up in front of the congregation and spoken about how we have forgotten the meaning of Christmas. They ring off the inevitable list of parties, presents, activities, and “meaningless” hustle and bustle in hopes of stirring their fellow Christians to not forget the “reason for the season.” Perhaps they are right; maybe as a society we have shrouded the simple beauty of Christmas with a busy season of activities, but in the midst of all the critiques I do not often hear of ways that people can establish rhythms and traditions that would help Christians to carve out the space in their lives to remember. A few years ago, my family began setting aside our Sunday evenings during the Advent season to remember Christ by lighting the candles of an Advent wreath in our home and having a short time of scripture reading and prayer that would prepare us to celebrate Christ’s birth. It has quickly become a treasured tradition for us and it is my desire to share it with you.

What is Advent?

Advent is the period of time covering the four Sundays leading up to the celebration of Christmas. It is a time set aside to prepare, celebrate, and remember all that took place for the entry of God’s son into the world. The word itself means “coming” and represents a great deal of what Christmas is about. First, we are looking back and celebrating the “coming” of Christ at the first Christmas. By doing so we are reminded of all that God did to prepare the time when the Savior Jesus Christ would enter into history. Second, we are looking at our current season and preparing our hearts to celebrate the day of remembrance that is “coming” upon us yet again. It is an opportunity to be sure that the celebration of the holiday does not come and go without us taking time to enter into the meaning of it. Third, we are looking at our own story and remembering the beautiful story of Christ “coming” into our own life. It is a time not only to celebrate God’s entrance into history, but His entrance by the Spirit of Christ into our own lives. For some it is a time to remember this and for others it may be a time to receive the news of His “coming” in their own hearts by faith. Lastly, we look forward to the future “coming” of our great King, Jesus

Christ. There is a day yet coming where he will rule every heart and every being in the universe will worship him and celebrate Him for the great God and Savior that He is. For us, Christmas is a glimpse of that day and we should celebrate it with all the joy that we will feel and know when His love has conquered all.

If you do a little research, you will quickly realize that people at different times and from different backgrounds within the church have celebrated the Sundays of Advent differently. When we began celebrating Advent on Sunday evenings we did not concern ourselves with discovering all the traditional underpinnings and origins of the practices, but were more concerned about creating a simple practice that could bring some structure to our time of remembrance and celebration as a family. We decided to use a traditional Advent wreath common in many churches and to light the candles each week in preparation for Christmas.

What is an Advent wreath?

An advent wreath is a traditional ornament of celebration made up of evergreen branches and five candles which has been used for centuries to celebrate Christmas. Wreaths have served as symbols of victory and remembrance in many cultures throughout history so it is a fitting ornament for the celebration of Christmas. Christmas is, after all, a celebration of God's victory over sin and a remembrance of how He has displayed his love through Jesus Christ. Evergreens are also fitting symbols that His victory is eternal and not subject to the effects of the different seasons of life. The five candles each have a different meaning, which we will discuss later. Generally speaking the candles point our minds and hearts to the beauty of light and remind us that Jesus is the great light of the world that has come to illuminate the darkness of our hearts and lead us into the presence of God.

To make your own wreath you can simply gather the necessary supplies and decorate it in preparation for the season. As you can see the wreath consists of four candles situated around a fifth central candle. The candles on the outside are made up of three purple candles (which represent a sense of waiting and expectation sometimes accompanied with fasting) and a fourth pink candle (which represents joy). In the center is a white candle (which represents Christ). During the holidays you should be able to find the candles, the candleholders, and a wreath in a local craft store, on Amazon, or at a Christian bookstore.

Getting Started

In the pages that follow you will find a guide that accompanies each of the four weeks of Advent as well as a fifth guide for use on Christmas Eve or Christmas day. Traditionally, the remembrances associated with each candle have been observed on the four Sundays immediately preceding Christmas day. If Sunday is not the best day of the week for you or your family to set aside a meaningful time, then consider finding a consistent evening that works and set that time aside. Before the first week arrives determine what time you will have the lighting of the candles each week. In my experience I have found it best to keep everything very simple. We set aside some time in the evening after dinner. Just before the time comes prepare some small snacks (baked goods, candy, or something festive) and drinks (tea, hot chocolate, eggnog). Once you are ready, gather around a table and turn all the lights off. Begin with lighting the candle and follow the guide for the week. When you are finished, enjoy the rest of your candle-lit dessert and sit and talk about your favorite Christmas memories or what you look forward to most about the holidays. It's that simple. Slow down and enjoy the moment.

In my experience, getting started is often the most important step. As you go, you will learn to adjust the tradition to your own situation and accomplish the true goal at the heart of it all. The real goal is to take time to slow down this year and turn your mind and heart toward Christ during this season of celebration. At different times you may have sensed what I have sometimes felt during the Christmas season: a real sense of longing for the reality that lies behind all of our activity. It is a longing for something deeper that we feel has been forgotten lying dormant beneath the thin veneer of tinsel and lights. Going through a ritual, lighting some candles, reading a passage of scripture, and praying will not fill this longing but maybe in the midst of that time you will be pointed to the reality of the One who can. One of the great joys of Christmas is the reminder that "God is with us," maybe this year you can use this little guide to help you prepare a place for Him to fill your Christmas with the joy of Christ's coming.

Sharing the Joy

As we live out our lives as Christians in the context of our communities and neighborhoods there are seasons of the year where the doors to spiritual conversations are wide open for us to demonstrate and share the love of Christ and the hope of the gospel. Christmas represents a unique season of the year when our friends and neighbors think about aspects of their lives that are often buried under the activity of the rest of the year. Consider for a second all the stories and heartwarming messages about family, love and meaning that parade across our screens, papers, and magazine during this time of year. They point to a

hunger in the soul that the gods of our culture have no ability to satisfy. Unfortunately – if the statistics are true – many non-Christians have few if any friendships with a committed Christian and will not initially consider attending your church. Through the simple practice of hospitality and the evening advent celebration in your home you have the opportunity to shine some light on the Christmas celebration happening in your neighborhood and take some practical steps toward encouraging people in your life to reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

Here are a few two simple ways that you could use the Advent celebrations in this booklet to take the first steps toward sharing the gospel with people in your neighborhood or connect with new families in your church.

1. Explain to your friends/neighbors that you are hosting a kickoff to the Christmas season by lighting a traditional Advent wreath in your home and want to invite them to join you as you light the wreath for the first time and share dessert with neighbors and friends. Set a convenient time, and when people have arrived gather them briefly to light the candle and use the reading in the booklet to share the meaning of the candle. From there just enjoy dessert and get to know one another. You may be surprised how this simple observance of a holiday tradition will prompt further conversation. At the end tell them that you will be lighting the candle in your home each Sunday evening leading up to Christmas and make it clear that they are welcome to join you. It is important to keep it simple, have a good dessert (which they could contribute to), and make sure people do not feel like they have to stay a long time.
2. Use the opportunity on the first night to plan to do some other simple activities on the other Advent evenings that everyone would enjoy. You could host a small Christmas cookie exchange in conjunction with another week, have a Christmas Carole sing-along, or plan to do a children's craft related to the theme of one of the candles. As people come up with a good idea, involve them in making it happen and you will be surprised with the level of participation. The possibilities are endless, but each time set aside a few minutes to turn down the lights, light the wreath and explain the next candle.
3. Invite a family from your church to join you for the evening. We have found that the advent celebrations are a great way to connect with another family in the church. We often look for a family who we have not had a good chance to connect with and use the four evenings to include some different people as we reach out to others in our neighborhood. Doing this accomplishes two important things that; it helps neighbors

who attend to have more than one person from our church to connect with and it models a heart for your neighborhood to other Christians in your church in a way that is reproducible.

When it comes to sharing Christ with others many people feel paralyzed by what they perceive to be the pressure of having to make a large, immediate impact in someone else's life. Because of the pressure we often settle for doing nothing at all. Here is an opportunity to pray for God to use you in your neighborhood, take some simple first steps to building bridges into the lives of other people, and wait and see where it will lead. Some of you may make an effort to invite some people into your home to join you and find yourself alone as a family in the living room the first evening. When this happens there is no reason to feel like the evening is bust. Help your family see that the time together is worthwhile no matter who joins you. Light the candles, share the scripture, and pray for God to graciously shine his light into the hearts of your friends and neighbors this Christmas. Then, enjoy your dessert with your family with thankful hearts as you remember the birth of the Lord and the beauty of Christmas.

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