

Advent and Christmas - Reason for the Season

Advent (from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming") is considered to be the beginning of the Church Year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown.

The season is for most Christians one of anticipation and hope (if one looks beyond the commercialization!), although at its beginnings the emphasis was much more on penitence, fasting and sin. For most Christians it is not just a celebration of a moment in time when a baby was born, but also looks beyond to a time when the Bible tells us that Jesus will come again, not as a weak and vulnerable baby but in power and with authority. The traditional Scripture readings for this time emphasize both the First and Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and our accountability for faithfulness at His coming, judgment on sin and the hope of eternal life.

Advent is also a spiritual journey that Christians take, through the truths of Scripture that point to the birth of Messiah, to a reaffirmation that he has come, is present in the world today and will come again in glory. It mirrors the journey of faith that Christians make after that moment of realization and acceptance of who Jesus is, in that we take that first step of faith in commitment, continue hopefully to walk the road of faith and increasing understanding, and look forward to our destination, which is to be in his presence forever!

According to the Catholic encyclopedia the celebration of Christmas (or the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord) is not known before the end of the fourth century when, according to Duchesne it was celebrated throughout the whole Church - by some on 25 December, by others on 6 January. There are hints of a period of preparation prior to the celebration of Jesus' birth - in a ruling in 380 that no one should be allowed to absent themselves from church from the 17th December until the feast of Epiphany - but it is not until the end of the sixth century that a prescribed period of time was set aside as preparation for Christmas. This was from 11th November, being the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, (the fast became known as "St. Martin's Fast," "St. Martin's Lent" or "the forty days of St. Martin") until Christmas Day. This observance of a period of fasting was later relaxed in Anglican, Lutheran and later the Roman Catholic Church - although still kept as a season of penitence by some.

Origins As with many Christian festivals, the dates may not accurately reflect the event, but were chosen possibly as an alternate to pagan festivals which they eventually replaced. For example, it's widely accepted that the date of Christmas Day is not thought to be Jesus' actual date of birth, and may have been chosen to coincide with ancient Roman solar festivals that were held on December 25.

Because the Roman emperor Aurelian fixed December 25th for the winter solstice holiday in AD 274, it is thought that the early Christians adopted this day for their Christ-mass so that they would be less conspicuous in the observance of their holiday.

A winter festival was traditionally the most popular festival of the year in many cultures. Reasons included less agricultural work needing to be done during the winter, as well as people expecting longer days and shorter nights after the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere.

Colors of Advent Traditionally, and certainly within the Catholic church the primary color of Lent is purple, which reflects the Lenten-style fasting that formed part of the build-up to Christmas in earlier centuries. The color forms a link between the birth and death of Jesus. On the third Sunday of Advent this changed to pink or rose in anticipation of the end of fasting and the start of rejoicing for the birth of the Savior (the Sunday is sometimes celebrated as *Gaudete Sunday* - from the Latin word for 'rejoice')

The Advent Wreath Most churches have at the heart of their worship an Advent wreath. The origins of the evergreen wreath are ancient and probably pagan, but there is a symbolism with the wreath and its candles that is useful in retelling the Christmas story.

The circle of greenery reminds us that God is eternal, the Alpha and Omega without beginning or end, and also of the hope we have in God, of newness, renewal and eternal life.

The candles symbolize the light of God entering the world through the birth of Jesus, and the four outer candles represent a period of waiting, perhaps the four centuries between the prophet Malachi (the last book in the Old Testament) and the birth of Jesus. Whilst the light from the candles reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world that comes into the darkness of our it also reminds us that we are called to be a light to the world as we reflect the light of God's love and grace to others.