

## **WHAT IS ADVENT?**

Advent is the season that begins the liturgical year. It consists of four Sundays starting with the Sunday closest to November 30th. The word advent is derived from the Latin *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival." In the societies of the Roman empire, the word *adventus* referred to the arrival of a person of dignity and great power -- a king, emperor, or even one of the gods. For Christians, Advent is the time when the church patiently prepares for the coming of the King of Kings, Jesus Christ.

## **WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S FOCUS DURING ADVENT?**

Advent is the first part of a larger liturgical season that includes Christmas and Epiphany and continues until the beginning of Lent. Even though Advent occurs in the month of December and is usually considered to be a prelude to Christmas, it is not simply about waiting for the birth of Christ. Advent is as much about preparing for Christ's return on Judgment Day. Indeed, the Advent season focuses on Christ's *threefold* coming -- past, present, and future. First, we remember the Lord's humble first coming in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Second, we give thanks for His present and continual coming to us through Word and Sacrament. Finally, we look forward with hope and longing to His second coming in glory to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day.

## **WHAT IS THE LITURGICAL COLOR FOR ADVENT?**

Purple is the traditional color for the season of Advent. Purple was the most costly dye in ancient times and was therefore used by kings to indicate their royal status. Purple also signifies the repentance of God's people as they patiently await the arrival of their Lord. In more recent times, some churches have adopted blue as the color for Advent. Blue represents hope, expectation, and heaven. It is also the color associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary in art and iconography.

## **WHAT IS AN ADVENT WREATH?**

The Advent wreath is one of the most popular symbols used by Christians during the season of Advent. These wreaths, consisting of a circle of evergreen branches set around four candles, are used in both churches and Christian homes. The evergreen circle stands for the eternal life that Christ has won for all believers. The burning candles represent the coming of Christ as the light of the world (John 1: 4 – 9). The colors of the Advent candles can vary. Traditionally, three purple candles and one rose-colored or pink candle are used. The purple signifies that Advent is a season of repentance as well as expectation. Many churches use blue candles in place of purple ones to emphasize the hopeful anticipation of the season. A candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, with another one lit on each succeeding Sunday. The joyfully colored pink candle is reserved for the third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete*, which means "rejoice" in Latin, is the opening word of the Introit for that Sunday: *Rejoice!... the Lord is near.* (Philippians 4:4).

Some Christians attach a specific interpretation to the four Advent candles. The first candle, or the Prophet Candle, symbolizes the hope and anticipation of Christ's coming in the flesh as prophesied so many places in the Old Testament. The second candle recalls how Christ appeared in the flesh in humble manner, being born of a virgin in the insignificant village of Bethlehem. This is why this candle is often referred to as the Bethlehem Candle. The third candle is known as the Shepherds' Candle. It recalls the rejoicing of the shepherds when they departed after having seen the Christ-child in the stable. The fourth candle is the Angels' Candle. It reminds us of the heavenly host that announced the good news of our Savior's birth. In addition to the four Advent candles, some Advent wreaths have a white candle in the center called the Christ candle. This candle is lighted on Christmas Eve and throughout the 12 Days of Christmas.

## **WHAT ARE THE GREAT O ANTIPHONS?**

The Great O Antiphons are seven brief evening prayers that are traditionally chanted during Advent worship from the 17th to the 23rd of December. They continue to be part of the seasonal devotions of many churches today.

## **WHY IS ADVENT SUCH AN IMPORTANT SEASON IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?**

While the rest of secular society is already caught up in the frantic rush of shopping, decorations, parties, and other distractions, the church takes pause during Advent to contemplate the wonder of God's underserved mercy and love in Jesus Christ. Christians approach the Advent season much as expectant parents approach the months before a child is born. There are feelings of exhilaration, uneasiness, longing, and awe as the day of arrival approaches. Just as parents do everything they can to get ready and put things into good order, God's people prepare themselves at home and at church for the coming of the Lord by exercising the disciplines of Advent: confession and repentance, fervent prayer, immersion in Scripture, fasting, and the singing of the Great O Antiphons and other seasonal hymns and anthems. Saint Paul's, like many congregations, conducts special mid-week Advent worship services and hands out special devotional booklets to give our members further opportunities to prepare their hearts for the coming of our Lord and Savior. The following familiar hymn verse beautifully captures our spirit of joyful anticipation and disciplined preparation during this season:

*Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes, The Savior promised long; Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne And ev'ry voice a song!*

The hymn extract is the first stanza of *Hark the Glad Sound!* by Philip Doddridge and Thomas Haweis, Hymn 349, [Lutheran Service Book](#), [Concordia Publishing House](#), 2006.

**Special thanks to [SAINT PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH](#) 12022 Jerusalem Road Kingsville, MD 21087 for the above summary of information.**