The Advent Wreath

Were the season of Advent observed to the fullest by every church and every family, Christmas would regain its proper position among the world’s spiritual festivals.

To accomplish this, Advent must not be hopelessly confused with Christmas. Its own particular spirit, as characterized in liturgy, hymnody, scripture and preaching, must be preserved.

One of the most beautiful traditions of Advent is the lighting of the Advent wreath. The Advent wreath is used in the church, at home, and in Sunday school. In church it is placed in or near the chancel, and it is lit for every service during Advent season. The purpose of the Advent wreath is to deepen our understanding of Christmas. As time passes from Advent Sunday to the Vigil of Christmas, the wreath grows in beauty until it is replaced finally by the Christmas crib and the Christmas tree – the symbols of Christ and the eternal life which he won for us.

Historically, the Advent wreath is traced to pagan sources. Some believe the idea of the wreath originated in Scandinavia where, during the shortest days of the year, people lighted candles on a wheel and prayed to the god of light that he would turn the wheel of the earth’s orbit to the sun again and lengthen the days. Since Advent sets a mood of waiting in the dark and since Christ was born on the day when the light begins to gain ascendancy over the darkness, it is a most appropriate Advent custom. Later the practice spread to Central and Western Europe.

The wreath evolved from the use of a simple spray of evergreen placed near the hearth. The evergreen came to symbolize everlasting life found in Christ. Since the greens came from out-of-doors where nature was in its winter sleep, the evergreen testified to a continuation of life. The bending of the branch so that the ends touched further symbolized life without end. So came about the circle – a wreath.

The candles signify God’s Son as the light of the world. Although practice varies, there usually are four candles for the four weeks of Advent and sometimes a red or white candle, known as the Christ candle, in the center. This last candle is lit on Christmas Eve.