

Advent -- Liturgy for Lighting Advent Candles

Come, O Christ, the Light!

Liturgy and Song for Lighting Advent Candles

For use on the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Eve or Christmas Day

One of the fondest Advent traditions for both congregations and families is the lighting of Advent candles. The tradition reaches back to pre-Christian northern Europeans. During the darkest days of winter, they lit as many as twenty-four candles on an evergreen-covered wheel or wreath. By lighting a candle, a day, they marked time, anticipating the return of the sun's light and warmth. By the 1500s, both Lutherans and Catholics adapted the Advent Wreath as a devotional way to prepare for the coming of Christ, the Light of the World.

Today, the Advent Wreath is usually an evergreen wreath placed on a table or suspended from a ceiling or an arch. In the wreath are four candles (usually blue or purple, occasionally one is pink); each candle represents one week during Advent. A white candle is often placed or suspended in the center of the wreath.

The symbols of the Advent Wreath are interpreted in many ways. The circle of evergreens reminds Christians of the eternal and ever-renewing promises of Christ. The lighting of candles, spanning the season, acknowledges the deepening of our preparation and the increasing light that bursts forth at Christmas. The colors of the candles also vary. Often the candles are purple or blue, noting the season's expectations of royalty, liberation, redemption, and hope. For the third Sunday of Advent, occasionally a pink candle is lit. This recognizes a shift of Advent themes in the Bible. The first two Sundays focus on the Bible's prophetic vision of Christ's future and final return; on the third and fourth Sunday, the readings focus on the coming of Jesus, the Christ. The third Sunday traditionally recalls John the Baptizer's call for repentance, and the fourth recounts God's call to Mary and her faithful response. The third Sunday has been identified in some traditions as "Gaudete," a day of joy and rejoicing. Finally, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, a center white candle is lit. The light of Christ is fully present. Jesus is born.

As you light Advent candles, the following liturgy may enrich your holy preparation. Although it is designed to be used with the lectionary readings from year A, the themes may be used any year. Use the liturgy before or following a meal at home, following an opening hymn, or before the reading of scripture lessons during congregational worship. Involve an individual or a family to light the candle and serve as readers.

Options are suggested so that a member or members of a family might share their own reflections about Advent. This reflection might come from a child or youth, as well as any adult. Following, the entire family or congregation responds with a prayer and by singing new words to an old French carol tune (see "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," number 345 in The New Century Hymnal). A portion of the melody is repeated each Sunday with the complete melody sung on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Another option for this liturgy is the "Order for Lighting Advent Candles," found in Book of Worship: United Church of Christ, pages 169–177. Rather than using the lectionary readings as a source for building the themes, that candle-lighting order draws on the themes of **hope, peace, love, joy, and good news.**

First Sunday of Advent (Focus: Isaiah 64:1–9)

Reader 1: O God, we light the first candle of Advent.

(A member of a family lights the first candle.)

Reader 2: We kindle it with hope. We long for you to come to our world, to break through and reign with compassion, justice, and peace.

(Option): We remember times we longed for God to be present to us, this congregation, and this world. We recall...(a member or members of a family describe a time they prayed for God to come, heal, or bring peace).

Reader 1: The prophet Isaiah also cried to God to tear open heaven and come down. He called God's people to do right. Isaiah called them to be refashioned like clay by God, the potter. This Advent, we call out to God.

People : Mighty God, creator of the world, break through all that keeps us from you. We ask for your mercy and reform us in your image. This Advent, visit us with your justice, love, and peace. Amen.

People (sing): Shine on us, O God of justice;
Guide our path through gloom of night;
Bear within us Wisdom's glory;
Come to us, O Christ the Light.

Second Sunday of Advent (Focus: Isaiah 40:1–11)

Reader 1: O God, we light the second candle of Advent.

(With the first candle already burning, a family member lights the second candle.)

Reader 2: We seek your comfort. Both mighty and tender, you come. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you.

(Option): We have sought such a God, both mighty and tender. We recall...(a member or members of a family describe a time they sought the might and tenderness of God.)

Reader 1: Isaiah announced God's coming to a people exiled in a broken and parched wilderness. He declared that God's redemption would make a highway in the desert and change the rough places into plain. God would come as a shepherd—feeding, leading, and cradling the weary flock. This Advent, we seek such a God.

People : Saving God, look upon your world and heal your land and your people. Prepare us to be changed. This Advent, teach us to be tender and just, as you are. Amen.

People (sing): Shine on us, O God of justice;
Guide our path through gloom of night;
Bear within us Wisdom's glory;
Come to us, O Christ the Light.

Third Sunday of Advent (Focus: John 1:6–8, 8–11)

Reader 1: We light the third candle of Advent.

(With the first two candles burning, a family member lights the third candle.)

Reader 2: We look to John, the one you sent, to point us to your light. The light will come into our world and enlighten everyone.

(Option): We have known people who have challenged us and called us into God's light. They seem, like John, called by God to prepare us for a deeper faith. We recall...(a member or members of a family describe persons who have impacted them and called them to a deeper, sometimes challenging, faith).

Reader 1: God sent John the Baptizer to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the true Light of the World. John called for people to repent of their sins and to live faithfully. He baptized with a cleansing water and proclaimed the new life that Christ, the one who would follow him, would bring. This Advent, we ask for God's mercy and a joyful new beginning.

People : Merciful God, we give thanks that you send messengers like John to call us to greater faith. We ask that in these days we prepare for you in prayer and acts of holy compassion. Forgive us and lead us to your light. Amen.

People (sing): Shine on us, O God of justice;
Guide our path through gloom of night;
Bear within us Wisdom's glory;
Come to us, O Christ the Light.

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Focus: Luke 1:26–38)

Reader 1: O God, we light the fourth candle of Advent.
(With the first three candles burning, a family member lights the fourth candle.)

Reader 2: We hear your angel Gabriel and witness the faith of Mary. Fill us with your grace and light.

(Option): We recall the times we have struggled but said yes. We know times when God has filled us and our world with blessing. We remember...(a member or members of a family describe a time of great joy when, although it may have begun in struggle, God has filled a situation with hope, love, or peace).

Reader 1: Mary was a young, strong, spiritual woman. Even though her life was not easy, she heard God's voice and said yes. Her song was a prayer that would uplift those who were downtrodden. Her lyrics shattered the proud and called the world to change. She would bear within her the promised child, Jesus, the Light of the World. This Advent, we respond to God's beckoning to us as well.

People : Revealing God, visit us and fill us with your Spirit. Bring your good news to life within us. Give us courage to carry your light into the injustices and shadows of this world. Amen.

People (sing): Shine on us, O God of justice;
Guide our path through gloom of night;
Bear within us Wisdom's glory;
Come to us, O Christ the Light.

Christmas Eve or Day (Focus: Isaiah 9:2–7, Luke 2:1–14, or John 1:1–14)

Reader 1: Rejoice, people of God! The light has come into the world.

(A member of a family lights the four Advent candles.)

O God, now we light the candle of your nativity!

(With all Advent candles lit, a member of the family lights the center white Christ candle.)

Reader 2: With the company of heaven and with sounds of great joy, you come to us. This is the time of light and resplendent joy.

(Optional): We have known times when God has come and brought life and light to our world.

God has been born among us. We remember...(a member or members of a family describe a time, at Christmas or some other time, when God has been joyfully and powerfully revealed to family, church, community, or world).

Reader 1: The prophet Isaiah proclaimed a time when those who walked in the shadows would see a great light. A light would shine and a child would be born to us. The evangelist Luke painted the nativity sky and repeated the heavenly song of the angels, "Glory, peace on earth and goodwill!" John declared that this great light is Christ, the Word made flesh. This great light lives among us. By it we behold God's glory—full of grace and truth. At Christ's nativity, we now rejoice.

People : God, our Life and Light, thank you for coming this night (day) to us. Thanks for touching all heaven and earth with your splendor. In every corner of the world, shine (this night) with your peace. In every corner of our hearts, shine (this night) with your grace. Amen.

People (sing): Shine on us, O God of justice;

Guide our path through gloom of night;

Bear within us Wisdom's glory;

Come to us, O Christ the Light.

Glory be to God and peace on earth

Christ is born! Alleluia!