

# CELEBRATING ADVENT



## CHRIST CHURCH VENTURA

Meeting at 78 Chrisman Avenue  
Sunday worship at 11:30 AM in Ventura  
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### THE ADVENT SEASON

#### Traditions

Traditions are important. They are like milestones along a highway which mark the road of our pilgrimage as we travel through this present world to our eternal home. Traditions help us to keep our family ties for generations. They serve to express our deepest convictions more fully in the totality of life. Traditions create memories and strengthen bonds as we become what God intends for us to be: a community of faith, bound together by the grace of God, united to the risen Lord Jesus Christ, giving expression to His grace and truth in the midst of the world.

Advent is a tradition, a time of preparation. It can be an extremely busy and distracting time. We all know that only too well. But in the midst of the busyness Advent remains a time of preparation. These four weeks leading to Christmas call us to reflect, remember, and give thanks.

The coming of the Lord Jesus was the first in a series of redemptive events including His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. All of which point to the salvation of a people. We at Christ Church Ojai are numbered among that people. A people set apart by God and for God, so that we might delight in Him forever. As we participate in this Advent tradition may we glorify and enjoy God more fully, for He is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him.

#### The Origins of Advent

There is no single biblical event upon which Advent is based. It has no root in the Old Testament and no precedent in the Jewish faith. In the Christian faith, Advent is something of a later addition in history, as is the celebration of Christmas itself.

Believers did not begin to celebrate Christmas as a distinct religious festival or holiday until the fourth or fifth century after the birth of Christ. When it did begin to be observed, it was done so in the month of December, even though that was not likely the month in which Christ was born. In the year 529, Emperor Justinian declared December 25 a civic holiday; in 567 the Council of Tours established the season of Advent as a time of fasting preceding Christmas day. At this same council they proclaimed the 12 days from Christmas to Epiphany as a sacred season.

When the church began to celebrate Christmas in the fourth century there were two distinct traditions that emerged. Christians in northern and Western Europe (Germany, France, Spain and the Netherlands) instituted a season of seven or more weeks that was designed to culminate in the Feast of Epiphany. This feast celebrates Christ's first appearance to the Gentiles when he was worshiped by the Wisemen. Epiphany is the Twelfth Day of Christmas and is celebrated on January 6 each year.

At the Feast of Epiphany new converts would be baptized and joined to the church. Fasting (refraining from eating certain foods or meals) was a central feature of this season, as well as a penitential attitude (sorrow for sin, refraining from joyful celebrations such as weddings, amusements, and other pleasures.)

A different tradition emerged in Rome and portions of southern Europe. A short, joyous season of anticipation marked their preparation for the birth of Christ.

Beginning in the eighth century, and continuing for several hundred years, a merging of the two traditions took place. The final structure of the Advent season combined features of both traditions. Rome adopted the fasting and penitential character of Advent while maintaining an emphasis

upon joyful celebration. The Northern Europeans shortened their observance to the four weeks that Rome practiced, no longer extending it through Epiphany. This compromise was concluded in the thirteenth century and has remained largely unchanged today.

### Advent and the Church Year

Within the liturgical calendar Advent marks the beginning of the Church year. The first Sunday in Advent is the one occurring nearest, or on, November 30. While always including four Sundays, the season may vary in length from 22-28 days, concluding on Christmas Eve.

Advent has come to us through the Latin *"advenire"* meaning "coming" or "arrival," referring of course to the coming or arrival of Jesus Christ. Within the Church, a three-fold meaning has been derived from this term: 1) the Advent of our Lord in the flesh at Christmas; 2) the Advent of the Lord in the Word and Spirit through the Church; and 3) the Advent of our Lord when He returns in glory to judge all men and nations. If there is one theme that runs throughout all three it is the joyful recognition of what God has accomplished and the anticipation of how He will yet fulfill His promises to the Church.

Our observance of Advent in the liturgical year helps us to mark sacred time. It became a safeguard against falling into the trappings of Christmas as celebrated by "the world." We are exhorted to live bittersweet lives in this season, glad-hearted for Christ's coming, but ever mindful that He returns as Judge over all men and nations. These two strains were present at the institution of Advent and are continued a thousand years later. When combined with Epiphany it becomes an extended period of focused attention upon God's promises and their fulfillment in the birth of our Savior.

This is why at Christ Church Ojai, families are especially encouraged to celebrate and worship together, experiencing the richness of the symbols, traditions and music that prepares our hearts for the coming Christ.

### The Advent Wreath

The origins of the Advent wreath are not known, but it is traditionally thought that Lutherans in Northern Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the first to make use of these symbols.

The circular wreath represents the unending love of God for His people. Evergreens adorning the wreath symbolize the hope of everlasting life that is available through the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The four candles within the wreath represent the four Sundays of Advent, and each one is designated with a particular meaning. A fifth candle, called the Christ candle, is placed in the middle of the wreath, representing Jesus as the Light of the world. The lighting of an additional candle each week in Advent symbolizes our faith that he who follows Christ will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of Life.

The first, second, and fourth candles are traditionally violet, corresponding to the liturgical color of the season. This color was chosen because it suggested royalty, for we await a King. The third candle is rose colored, and of the four Sundays it is especially designated as a day of joy. The fifth, or Christ candle, is always white, suggestive of the purity and holiness of Christ.

### Advent Precedes Christmas

Often we fail to distinguish between the two seasons of Advent and Christmas. Advent is a preparatory time of four Sundays prior to Christmas. Historically its themes have

been anticipation of the coming of Christ, penitence, fasting and joy. The traditional meanings of the candles correspond to these themes.

The first candle symbolizes the Old Testament prophecies of the long awaited Messiah, the hopes of Israel through the ages. The second candle calls to mind the angelic visitation regarding John the Baptist, the immediate herald of the Messiah. Both of these candles also suggest the coming judgment that God was bringing through the ministry of Christ. Christ, the Messiah and chief of the Prophets, called people to repentance for sin. Traditionally, therefore, these weeks are a time of fasting and penitence.

The third candle, different in color and representing joy, was part of the original Roman heritage incorporated into Advent. This is often called the shepherds' candle recalling the announcement of *"good tidings of great joy"*, which unexpectedly brightened the hearts of these lowly shepherds. The fourth candle bears light on the Savior born in a manger. Mary is traditionally associated with the fourth candle, representing humility and her ready obedience to God's will.

Christmas is the season that begins with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The events associated with Christmas occur during and after the birth, not prior to it as in Advent. The Christmas season is the time of angels, shepherds and wisemen. It culminates twelve days later in Epiphany, or the celebration of Christ's first appearance to the Gentiles as He was worshipped by the wisemen. The season is still one of anticipation, for we await His return to earth in glory at His Second Coming. It is, however, a season characterized mainly by the joy of His arrival. Still present, though, is the more somber note of the prospect of His return as Judge over all men and nations.