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What Is Advent ?

Preparing for Christmas

Seasons of the Christian Year

Christian churches use the cycle of seasons to bring before us, each year, the life of Jesus and its impact on the world. In the early days of Christendom, the resurrection of Christ was the only special day celebrated. It held the prime impact of Jesus' life on Christians, as well as promise of the future, Churches still celebrated the Jewish holy days. As the years went on, the church dropped the Jewish holy days and added more and more Christian celebrations. The yearlong cycle leads from one to the next, so we see the whole of Jesus' life and his challenge to us to go into the world throughout the year.

Advent

Advent is the first season of the cycle, though it was not the first one celebrated by the early church. We celebrate Advent the four Sundays before Christmas. The word *advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "arrival" or "coming".

The color purple is a royal color because of the time and expense required to produce purple dye. Purple helps us recognize Christ as our King. It is considered Mary's color and represents hope. Some of the symbols we use include the wreath (representing God's eternal love), evergreens (ever-living God), candles (Christ as the light of the world), trumpets (prophecy), poinsettia and rose (blood Christ shed for us), and bells (declaring the joy of Christ's coming).

Christmas

Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and lasts for twelve days until Epiphany. It is the celebration of Christ's birth. The color for Christmas is white, signifying purity and light. We use many of the same symbols as Advent. Some churches do not add the Christ Child to nativity sets until Christmas Eve.

Epiphany

Epiphany is celebrated on January 6. The word *epiphany* means "to go forth". The magi set out on their epiphany, searching for the Christ Child. When they left on their return journey, they went forth, spreading the good news to other countries.

The color for Epiphany is green, representing growth. We remember how Christ's message was spread by the magi. We do not actually know the number of magi who came to see Jesus, but three gifts are mentioned in Matthew. Some of the symbols we use include crowns (royalty), gifts (the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh), and star (led the magi).

Season after Epiphany

Season after Epiphany extends from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday. This is an "Ordinary Season." It emphasizes the life and teachings of Jesus. This time helps us move from the childhood of Jesus through his ministry. During this season we get into the heart of Jesus' message. It prepares us to live the life of a true follower of Christ.

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The color for this season is also green, a color for growth, indicating our growth as a Christian. To symbolize the growth theme of this season, we use the symbol of a sprouting plant. We also use symbols from Jesus' life such as a fish or fishnet (symbolizing times that Jesus spoke of fishing, such as Matthew 4:19) or water, shells, and the dove (symbolizing his baptism as told in Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22).

Easter

Easter begins on Easter Sunday and lasts for fifty days until Pentecost. This is when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ.

Lent

Lent is a forty-day period before Easter beginning on Ash Wednesday. In counting those forty days we do not include Sundays which are considered "mini-Easters."

Pentecost

Pentecost is the fiftieth day (seventh Sunday) after Easter. It is sometimes called the birthday of the church.

Season after Pentecost

Season after Pentecost is sometimes called "Ordinary Season." It lasts from the Sunday after Pentecost until Advent begins. During this season we emphasize spreading the gospel and missions.

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COLORS

All of the Chrismons are made in either white or gold or in a combination of the two colors.

White, the Liturgical color for Christmas, suggests the innocence, purity, and perfection of our Savior. In our culture, it is the color of joy. Scripture often uses white to portray purity and equates it with light to denote completeness.

Isaiah 1:18; Mark 9:3, Revelation 20:11

Gold, as a symbol for the glory and majesty of God and the Son of God, is also derived from Biblical usage.

Exodus 25:11 ff; Revelation 1:13-16; 21:18-21

For emphasis, certain Chrismons show a touch of **RED** to remind us of the blood of Christ by which we are saved.

Hebrews 9:14

Symbols marked with this spot of red are the pelican-in-her-piety, the sacrificial lamb, and some crosses.

Although few people who see our tree are aware of it, we add other colors to Chrismons when their use is necessary to the meaning of a symbol:

The stone, which represents the tribe of Judah, in the Jesse tree must be **GREEN**.
Exodus 1:1, 2; 28:18.

The burnt out wicks on the lamps of the five foolish virgins are **BLACK** to differentiate them from the still burning lamps of the wise virgins.

Matthew 25:1 ff

To Us a Child Is Born

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Isaiah's Prophecy
Isaiah 9:1-7

Christmas is heralded as a time of joy, friendship and celebration. But the reality is that it is not always a happy season. As I write, this Advent a dear friend sits at the side of his forty-five-year-old wife who just this week has learned she has terminal cancer. Christmas can remind us of past losses, the family we wish we had or our economic stress.

As we turn to this beautiful passage of Isaiah, memorably recorded in Handel's *Messiah*, we encounter the people of Israel and Judah in a terrible state. King Ahaz has turned away from the sign God offered him, but now Isaiah prophesies of a greater King who is coming to put things right. *Read Isaiah 9:1-7.*

Describe a time when you have been overwhelmed with the reality of the darkness and evil which is present in our world.

The light dawns in verses 2-5. What specific changes does Isaiah predict?

Look at Isaiah 8:19-22. What do you learn about the state of mind of the people from these verses?

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What do you think it would have been like for the people to hear Isaiah's words in 9:2-5?

How has the Lord brought light into your dark corner of the world?

Reflect on the names in verse 6. what significance does each one have?

In what ways is the coming of the kingdom of justice and righteousness mentioned in verse 7 good news for the poor, the needy and the oppressed?

Which of these titles—"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"—particularly describes God as you have known him during a time of difficulty?

What would you like to do in the approaching weeks of Advent to focus your mind and heart on Christ? (see "Getting the Most Out of Advent of the Savior" for a list of ideas.)

Ask God to prepare your heart for the coming of Christ.