

Keeping Advent with Children:
Simple Lessons and Prayers
for the Season of Expectation
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church
Madison, WI

How to Use Your Wreath and Booklet

Set up your wreath somewhere central in your home – the center of your dining table is ideal (the one you actually eat at, not the “company” one!). You can decorate your wreath with evergreen cuttings, or whatever you like. When you sit down for dinner, or at another quiet moment in your evening (before bed?), light a candle (or two, or three, or four) and spend a moment praying or just enjoying the light.

During the week after the first Sunday of Advent, light one candle; after the second Sunday, light two candles. After the third Sunday of Advent, you'll add the pink candle. After the fourth Sunday, light all four. You could add a special white candle in the middle of your wreath for Christmas. Adding lights week by week, even as it grows darker and darker outside, helps us enter into the anticipation of the season.

This booklet offers some short prayers and readings you can use when you light the candles. The Collects are adapted from the Advent Collects (short prayers) in the Book of Common Prayer, the worship book of the Episcopal Church. The Scriptures are taken from the Sunday Scriptures for this year's Advent season. The O Antiphons are an ancient Advent poem, perhaps 1500 years old. You may recognize that the familiar Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (#56) is a version of the Antiphons. They are called the “O Antiphons” simply because each one starts with the exclamation, O!

You could read all three texts every evening, or read all three on Sunday evening and just the prayer or antiphon for the rest of the week. Young kids can easily learn the simple responses; older kids can read a lesson or prayer.

About the Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath has roots in pre-Christian Europe, when evergreens and candles were symbols of the persistence of life and light through the dark and frozen winter. At some point in the Middle Ages, the custom was Christianized and became a way for families to observe Advent at home, starting in Germany and spreading around Europe.

Purple is a traditional Advent color, because purple was a kingly color in the ancient world (purple dye was expensive!) and in Advent, we await the coming of a King. Purple is also the color of the seasons of penitence, Advent and Lent – times when the people are called to reflection and self-examination, before encountering the great mysteries of Christ's birth, and his death and resurrection. The rose-colored candle for the third Sunday of Advent symbolizes a lightening of the penitential mood in anticipation of Christmas joy; this Sunday was traditionally called “Gaudete Sunday,” from the Latin word for “Rejoice!”.

About These Simplified Texts

In adapting our Advent prayers and lessons for use with young children, I have chosen to shorten and simplify, but made very few changes. Children often enjoy rich language and engaging images. “Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness” is much more exciting than “help us not do bad things”! If your child has questions about particular words or metaphors, open a dictionary and enjoy the conversation.

The First Week of Advent

Collect for the week:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light; that in the last day, we may rise to the life immortal. **Amen.**

Scripture lesson: Isaiah 2: 4 - 5

In days to come, people shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

O Antiphon

O Wisdom, coming forth from the Most High,
filling all creation
and reigning to the ends of the earth;
come and teach us the way of truth.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

What are plowshares and pruning hooks? A plowshare or plow is a tool used on farms, to prepare the ground for planting. A pruning hook is a tool for taking care of trees in an orchard. What does it mean to take weapons and turn them into tools for growing food?

The Second Week of Advent

Collect for the Week:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Scripture lesson: Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. They will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

O Antiphon

O root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the nations;
kings will keep silence before you for whom the nations long; come and save us and delay no longer.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

What is a fatling? A fatling is a young animal, like a calf or lamb, that has been fattened up - fed lots of rich food - in order to be eaten for some special celebration. In Isaiah's vision, the fatling gets to be a friend instead of a feast!

The Third Week of Advent

Collect for the Week:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us. **Amen.**

Scripture Lesson: James 5:7-8

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

O Antiphon

O key of David

and sceptre of the House of Israel;

you open and none can shut,

you shut and none can open:

come and free the captives from prison,

and break down the walls of death.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The Fourth Week of Advent

Collect for the Week:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ may find in us a mansion prepared for himself. **Amen.**

Scripture lesson: Matthew 1:20-21

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child growing within her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

O Antiphon

O morning star, splendor of the light eternal
and bright sun of righteousness:
come and bring light
to those who dwell in darkness
and walk in the shadow of death.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.