

## Hope: First Advent Friday December 2024

It's the first Friday of Advent, the first week of that season that is unique to Christians. It is a season that is marked with lots of activity and lots of excitement and good cheer because it is the season that precedes Christmas Day.

In our modern western culture, that sense of joyous anticipation comes from the excitement around seeing other people's faces light up when they open the gifts that we have chosen to give them. We spend time searching online or flipping through catalogs or magazines, maybe even time shopping from store to store, to find the perfect gift that reflects the way we feel about the recipient. We carefully wrap the packages, assuming there is more than one person who has earned our love and gratitude, while listening to Christmas music. Or we might be humming Christmas carols in our heads while folding the paper and tying the bows.

We might not be as cognitively attuned to the tradition that the church honors during Advent as we are to the traditions of shopping and sending Christmas cards. There is a lot of enthusiastic energy spent on decorating our houses and baking and entertaining our friends at Christmas parties. The church traditions, in contrast, tend to inspire reflection and contemplation because they focus on the deeper spiritual meaning of the season.

One of the traditions in the Episcopal Church is the practice of lighting the four candles on the Advent Wreath. The season of Advent started as a forty day fast before Epiphany in around the 5th century. It was set apart as a penitential time of preparation. It wasn't until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's that the focus of Advent became the preparation for the coming of Christ. The concept of Advent calendars started long before the 60's as people, eager to open presents under the tree, counted down the days before Christmas.

The history of the advent wreath can be traced back to Lutheran pastor Johann Wichern who in 1839 decorated a large wooden cartwheel with 24 small red candles for the weekdays and 4 large white candles for the Sundays before Christmas. The four candles we use in Advent wreaths today represent those Sundays. Most wreaths have a 5th white candle in the center that is lit only on Christmas Day. It is only relatively recently that each of those four candles became associated with a theme. The themes are hope, peace, joy and love in our Episcopal tradition.

So this week has been the week of hope. Where is our hope? Church teaching tells us that our hope is in the Lord. Have you ever wondered why or how our hope can be in

the Lord, specifically our Lord Jesus Christ? When I think about the significance of Jesus' life and ministry and sacrifice, I can't ignore the fact that Jesus came into a world much like ours today that did not know how much God loved the world and all the created things in it. They were overcome with worry about the economic and social oppression of the political environment in which they lived.

God knew that. He heard His people's cries and came into that very matrix to turn it upside down. When God hears our cries, He still comes to us through those who manifest Jesus in their hearts.

The first week of Advent is the time to acknowledge the Hope that God sends into our world, the Hope that is available to us through faith in His Son, our savior Jesus Christ. On this day, by God's grace, may Hope be born anew in your heart. Amen.