

## Blue Candles on the Advent Wreath?



The five-candle Advent wreath (three purple and one pink, with a central white Christ Candle) is a familiar sight in many church sanctuaries during the month of December. What most worshipers don't realize is that the modern Advent wreath tradition is of fairly recent vintage.

### History of the Advent Wreath

***“The concept of the Advent wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th Century. However, it was not until three centuries later that the modern Advent wreath took shape.***

***Research by Prof. Haemig of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, points to Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881), a Protestant pastor in Germany and a pioneer in urban mission work among the poor as the inventor of the modern Advent wreath in the 19th century. During Advent, children at the mission school Rauhes Haus, founded by Wichern in Hamburg, would ask daily if Christmas had arrived. In 1839, he built a large wooden ring (made out of an old cartwheel) with 20 small red and 4 large white candles. A small candle was lit successively every weekday and Saturday during Advent. On Sundays, a large white candle was lit. The custom gained ground among Protestant churches in Germany and evolved into the smaller wreath with four or five candles known today. Roman Catholics in Germany began to adopt the custom in the 1920s, and in the 1930s it spread to North America. Professor Haemig's research also indicates that the custom did not reach the United States until the 1930s, even among German Lutheran immigrants.”***

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent\\_wreath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent_wreath)

At one time, Advent was a penitential season characterized by fasting disciplines similar to those of Lent. Because of this, the predominant color of the Advent wreath came to be purple — the same liturgical color as Lent. Because it was common in Roman Catholic churches to ease up on the Advent fast a little on the third Sunday, a pink candle was substituted for one of the purple ones. That Sunday is known to Roman Catholics as “Gaudete Sunday” — literally, Joy Sunday — because that is the first word in the introit to the mass (“*Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete*” — “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice,” from Philippians 4:4).

During the mid-twentieth century, many American Presbyterians — liking the idea of counting down the Advent Sundays leading up to Christmas — adopted the Advent wreath tradition, but they imported the Roman Catholic three-purple-and-one-pink color scheme without paying much attention to what the colors actually mean. Few Presbyterians today are aware that Advent purple symbolizes fasting and penitence, and a tiny percentage of those who do know what the purple color means could explain the reason behind the pink candle.

The simple truth is that Advent has ceased to be a penitential season for most Protestants (and even many Roman Catholics, if truth be told). It's a season of spiritual re-commitment, yes, but that re-commitment takes the form of hopeful expectation rather than penitential disciplines. As for the pink candle, it has never had any significance in Presbyterian/Reformed worship traditions.

### **A Case for Advent Blue**

In recent years, an alternative liturgical-color tradition has arisen for Advent, seeking to differentiate the season as one with its own unique spiritual emphases, distinct from that of Lent. Rather than using purple, churches that follow this newer tradition use a deep blue known as Sarum Blue, from the ancient Sarum Rite of the Church of England. In churches following the Sarum Rite, blue rather than purple was the Advent color.



The rector of one Episcopal church puts it this way:

***“Deep blue is the color of the clear, predawn sky, the color that covers the earth in the hours before the sun rises in the east. Most of us are not looking at the sky at that hour – perhaps we’re still asleep, or too weary to notice it as we get into our car for our commute. Nonetheless, a deep, dark blue is the color that covers us in the dark, cold hours before the dawn.*”**

***Thus we use deep blue for Advent to shade the season with a hint of expectation and anticipation of the dawn of Christ. Surely penitence and spiritual discipline are part of the traditional Advent observance, and this is why so many of us are using Advent wreaths and devotionals to mark the days of Advent. Advent is a time to recommit to our faith and to our God – no matter the color. But Advent involves more than penitence and by using deep blue we err on the side of emphasizing the church’s hope-filled and***

***faithful watch for Christ. The deep blue of Advent is meant to inspire in us the hope of faith, and to encourage us to keep watch for the promised light of Christ to break over the horizon, changing night into day, darkness into light, and filling our lives and our world with a holy and righteous splendor.”***

Surely, Christian worship traditions should have theological meaning behind them, inviting worshipers to seek a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Third-Sunday-of-Advent pink has zero meaning for Presbyterians, and the purple of the other Sundays evokes fasting and penitential disciplines that are no longer part of our Advent spiritual practice — if, indeed, they ever were.

The Sarum Blue candles of the newer Advent tradition make the season stand out as special in its own right, and the uniformity of color over the four Sundays reflects the way we actually order our Advent worship. The white color of the central Christ Candle is unchanged because, after all, the babe whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day is the light of the world. As our Nicene Creed puts it, he is “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God of true God...”

In moving away from purple as the liturgical color of Advent, we Presbyterians lose little: and in adopting deep blue as our Advent color, we gain a world of new meanings.



Carl Wilton  
Lamington Presbyterian Church, 2018