



**GOD'S WORK
Our Hands**



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Advent traditions: Try something new

By Sue Sprang

Lutherans have a rich tradition of observing the season of Advent in the congregation and in the home. Many traditions have evolved through the years as congregations, families and society adapt them to their circumstances. Here are some of these traditions (including their origins), with the hope that you or your congregation will find one or two to adopt and adapt as your own.

Wreath (Germany): The shape (circle) symbolizes God's everlasting love and the promise of eternal life. Many Lutherans use five candles—three blue, one rose (or pink) and one white. A new candle is lit each Sunday in Advent in this order: blue, blue, rose, blue. There are two main explanations for the candles, one traditional and one *contemporary*:

- **Advent 1:** prophecy/hope.
- **2:** Bethlehem/peace.
- **3:** angel/joy.
- **4:** shepherds/love.

The white "Christ" candle is lit on Christmas Eve and Day.

Waiting for the Light (India): Begun by Christians and then adopted by secular society, Indians decorate with an abundance of greenery and strings of lights. They also light small lamps to place on their roofs or on top of walls. Christians also decorate mango or banana trees and hang a "Star of Bethlehem" outside. Being surrounded by light is a reminder of the coming of Christ, the light of the world.

Paper lanterns (China): Christians in China use paper lanterns in various colors to decorate their homes. They also might include "Trees of Light" decorated with lanterns, paper flowers and paper chains. The light brings hope to those watching for Christ.

Las Posadas (Mexico/Latin America): *Las Posadas* ("the inns") runs Dec. 16-24 and re-enacts Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. Participants walk from house to house singing the traditional *Las Posadas* song as they become pilgrims seeking lodging. Those inside the homes are the "innkeepers" who turn travelers away. On the final evening, they are invited into a home for prayer and refreshments. Sometimes this "home" is the local church, where participants join in the Christmas Eve service.

Calendar (Germany): Advent calendars can be made from various materials (wood, cardboard, cloth, for example). Most popular is the opening of a small compartment each day to find a surprise. A fun alternative is to attach, rather than find, a surprise each day. Finding a premade calendar that begins on the first day of Advent can be a challenge, as most begin with Dec. 1.

St. Nicholas (Turkey): St. Nicholas was a provincial bishop in fourth-century Asia Minor. Known for his generosity to the poor, Nicholas would visit their homes and anonymously leave gifts—usually gold coins. Many Europeans observe St. Nicholas Day

on Dec. 6. Some follow the tradition of leaving their children's shoes where St. Nicholas can fill them with small gifts or candy. Santa Claus, who seemingly lavishes gifts on children who are "good" or whose families can afford to buy presents, is a corruption of St. Nicholas. The giving bishop can help us teach our children differently.

Advent candle (possibly Scandinavia): A single candle, traditionally red or white, is marked at intervals to be lit during Advent. On the day it is lit, the candle is allowed to burn until the next date is to be lit.

The Jesse tree (Europe): The Jesse Tree is a small tree or branch that is decorated with themed ornaments. They began as teaching tools at a time when the common people didn't have the luxury of reading. There are two traditional themes:

- **Jesus' family lineage.** Jesse, the father of King David, is the one who is named as the familial source of Jesus. The ornaments represent Jesse and those between him and Jesus.
- **The Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.** The ornaments represent the prophets, such as Isaiah.

There is also a more contemporary theme: *The names of Jesus*, where ornaments represent the



An Advent candle is a simple item with a meaningful message.

various names for the Christ child. In all three cases, ornaments are added to the tree throughout Advent, and the Jesus ornament is added on Christmas Day.

Advent chain (origin not specified): The chain marks the days throughout Advent. Traditionally the "links" were made of purple or red and green paper. Today blue is also used. Cut one strip of paper for each day of Advent and one white or yellow star. Write or draw something on each link—a Bible verse to look up, a good deed to do that day, a Christmas story figure, for example.

Attach the strips to create loops that interlock to form a chain, with the star at the top. Detach a link and read the message each day. By Christmas Day, only the star will remain.

There are lots of ideas out there. Numerous resources about these traditions can be found on the internet. Your local library might also have some resources. The ultimate goal is to take the ones that speak to you, adopt them, and mold them to make your journey to the manger a hope-filled and meaningful one. 4

Sue Sprang is a member of Christ the King Lutheran Church, Gladwin. She writes for the North/West Lower Michigan Synod website.



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