

THE ADVENT WREATH

Perhaps only second to the decorated furs in its association with the season is the Christmas Wreath. From doors and entryways, windows and street lamps across the land, above fireplaces and fashioned into cookies, these circles of garland bestowed with various treasures wild and crafted, are hung to mark the ever returning celebration of the holiday. When they come out, the countdown starts!

Accompanying the universal decoration is the arrival of the Advent calendars. From simple sheets of paper torn away day after day, to elaborate model homes lit to life, we have become quite caught up in anticipation of counting down from 25! Add in the more contemporary customs of including a chocolate, a cheese, even a glass of wine or a sip of gin to mark the passing of another day, and you can see why this is such a popular time of year!

For some 150 years, our faith heritage has combined these two iconic elements into what we call the Advent Wreath. A symbol that marks the perpetual nature of the good news of the season and quickens our anticipation for the day in which the good news cried out with his first breaths.

THE STORY

Advent itself is a tradition dating back to the middle ages, as a season of anticipation and focus on Jesus who was gifted to humanity as Christmas morning celebrates. Yet, the advent wreath is a relatively modern invention, at least when talking about traditions.

The story goes that in 1839, a German man named Johann Hinrich Wichern introduced the first Advent wreath. At the time, Wichern was operating a home for poor children in Hamburg. Each day the children would wake with great anticipation and ask, "Is it Christmas today!" Imagine dozens of voices waking early while the sun is just cresting the horizon. The voices start off as a murmur. One of the boys nudges his bunkmate and whispers in a not so subtle volume, "Hanz, are you awake? I think its Christmas morning! Do you think we'll get that meal that Herr Wichern has been telling us about? Maybe even those gifts that have been collecting in the front storage closet?!" The small voices increasing in decibels with each semi-rhetorical question until the entire room begins to rustle.

"What are you talking about?" comes a half-wakened voice. "Stefan wants to know if it is Christmas morning today," comes a reply from across the room. Suddenly every head is up in bed, asking the others if this sun's rising is the one they have been waiting, somewhat, patiently to arrive.

Wichern can hear the clamor down the hall, even before opening his door. He knows what the commotion is all about, but also knows that it is still several weeks until the day which will bring so much joy to these children and which brought such amazing gifts to the world itself. He

pauses for a moment pondering how to let the boys down gently but dreading the thought of repeating this deflation over and over again. He knows the boys struggle with short-term memory, they are young and excitable after all. It will only be a day or two before one of them wakes once again from anticipation asking if today just might be Christmas day. What will he do? What can he do to help their anticipation grow in a way that both delays their gratification and at the same time increases their expectations? He does not want to crush them nor tease them. He wants to encourage in them Advent.

Lost in thought, he stares out the second story window of his little haven. Across the street he sees the garland wreath hung on the cobbler's door. The old man put it up last week to mark the beginning of Advent and thus the Christmas season. And then a marvelous idea smacks Johann and he runs downstairs to his front door, still in his night clothes.

Taking off the wreath on his own door, he lays it on the kitchen table. He starts digging through the drawers and cabinets in the adjoining room. Rummaging through each. Finding one component of his invention at the back of the middle drawer, another on the mantle, and still more in the bottom cupboard. At last, he has all the pieces he needs. Going back to the table, he places four large white candles on each compass end of the horizontal wreath. Nestled in the fresh garland, these candles stand tall like castle steeples in the king's grand forest. Between the first two steeples he lines up five smaller, red candles. Like the fire towers lit across the mountain tops connecting the kingdom's regions, these red flames make sure that no communication is lost. Wichern adds a set of five red candles between the next two spires, and four final candles to complete the circle. Twenty four candles in all now adorned the wound forestry.



He steps back to admire the freshly created centerpiece. Not all the candles are of even height. Some have been used previously, and others have chunks of wax missing, but nonetheless, his solution sets grand before him. Wichern calls the boys down to the dining room. Like a herd of cattle clamoring for water the stampede barrels into the room. Expecting that this indeed is the morning, the runaway mob crashes to a silent stop when they see the table not filled with food but an odd ornament. Wichern waits until the room is full and all the boys' presence accounted. Beckoning them to squeeze around the table, he begins to explain what they are beholding with confused wonder.

"Peter, why do we celebrate Christmas?" he asks. The youngest boy answers confidently, "Because it was the day Jesus was born." "Very good, Peter," Wichern replies. "And why do we celebrate Jesus being born?" he asks the crowd. "Because he is our Savior and King," Hanz

courageously if somewhat sheepishly declares. “Right!” Wichern reacts, “And, what does Jesus bring us as King and Savior?” Wichern puts to the faces staring up at him. Well trained by Wichern’s faith, Gunter shouts, “Joy!” and Franz “Peace!”. “Yes, yes!” responds Wichern, “And...” encouraging the boys to finish out the themes of Advent, which they had heard a dozen times before. “Love!” shouts Heinz. “And the last is hope!” declares Jurgen. With the pride of both teacher and parent, Wichern congratulates, “You’ve got it boys! Well done.”

Then he points to the candle filled wreath laying before them and says, “Indeed Jesus is the King and Savior of the whole world, all this round earth is his...”, using his fingers to draw the boys’ attention to the garland ring. “Nothing is left out.” Pointing now to the white candle closest to him, Wichern explains, “Jesus brings with him into the world, hope.” Moving clockwise, he points to the second tower, “And peace, and joy, and love” placing his hand on each of the remaining white steeples. “He did so once at his birth, and he does so still day after day, year after year until the entire earth is filled with what he gifts us.”

“These are the four Sundays that lead us to Christmas day,” Wichern says. “Each of the four Sundays is special. They stand out in our history and our world to declare the gifts that Jesus’ birth brings to us all. We will light the first today, and then tomorrow a red candle, and the next day another red candle, and the next another; each day building our expectations that the light of the world will indeed fill the whole world with his presence on Christmas morning. When the circle is complete, boys, then that will be Christmas day. Do you understand?” he asks.

The boys look at him with affirming eyes full of anticipation for the morning to come at the end of the circle and expectation for that morning’s lighting, and so the Advent wreath was born.

TODAY

Over time the smaller candles were removed, the towering candles turned purple to represent the royalty of the king they announce, and some added a fifth white steeple in the center to be lit on Christmas day itself. But, the same motion around the wreath has been kept year after year in expectation of the glory of Christ filling the earth. On each Sunday of Advent a new candle has its flame sparked to life, illuminating all to the gift presented to the world via Christ, until all he brings shows brightly across his entire kingdom.

