

## HANGING THE GREENS – ONLINE

### *<sup>1</sup>The Meaning of Advent*

Now is the acceptable time spoken by the Spirit, the day of salvation, peace, and reconciliation: The great season of Advent. This is the time eagerly awaited by the prophets, the time that holy Simeon rejoiced to see. This is the season that the church has always celebrated with special solemnity. We, too, should always observe it with faith and love, offering and praise, and thanksgiving to God for the mercy and love God has shown us in this mystery.

Today, we prepare our hearts for this Season of waiting, this season in which we, the people who have walked in darkness, will see a great light.

Therefore, it is fitting that, in addition to preparing ourselves, we prepare sacred space with the symbols of the season. Let us, through the great traditions of our faith, join with the shepherds and Magi and seekers throughout the ages to welcome the One who came at Christmas.

### *Blessing of the Advent Candles and Wreath*

During Advent, we prepare by lighting candles each week. As we see the darkness of the world and the darkness of the winter season, we bear witness that the Word of God has come into the world to be a light for all people. The light comes into the world, shines in the darkness, and is never extinguished. Advent candles are a visible reminder of Christ's light and the hope Advent brings us each year.

Like the prophets of old, we await the promised salvation of the Lord, and we look for the Light to shine again in the darkness.

**We place these lights in sacred space as a witness to the light of Christ present with the faithful in every time and every place, and we ask God's blessing upon them and upon ourselves.**

### *Blessing of the Paraments*

Christians offer worship and praise to God not only through prayers and singing, but through the work of their hands and the expression of their hearts. Our Creating God delights in our artistry. We create, because, being made in God's own image, we are fashioned after the One who created us.

Artwork, such as tapestries and parament coverings, are not just for mere aesthetics. They glorify God. These symbols remind us of the liturgical season, calling us to be mindful of the coming of our Lord.

The traditional colors for Advent are purple and blue – purple, the color of penitence; blue, the color of hope. With hope, we look to the new year unfolding before us like the folds of the paraments we hang.

During Advent, we wait with anticipation for the revelation of God's promise and celebrate Christ's coming. Even as this rich cloth reminds us of earthly majesty and power, it points beyond to the perfect justice and power of Christ's majesty.

**We adorn our sacred spaces with paraments and banners to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, giving thanks for centuries of tradition and dedicating ourselves to a new season of creative service, and we ask God's blessing on them and on ourselves.**

## *Blessing of the Evergreens*

One of the most striking symbols of Christmas is the use of evergreens in churches and in homes. Among ancient Romans, evergreens were an emblem of peace, joy, and victory. Early Christians placed these symbols in their windows to indicate that Christ has entered the home.

Holly and ivy, along with pine and fir, are called “evergreens,” because their leaves stay a perpetual, verdant green. They are ever-green, ever-alive, even in the midst of winter. They symbolize the unchanging nature of our God, and they remind us of the everlasting life that is ours through Jesus the Christ. Additionally, holly has been used to symbolize the burning bush as well as Mary whose being glows with the Holy Spirit.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote: “The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of your sanctuary.”<sup>2</sup>

Because the needles of pine and fir appear not to die each season, the ancients saw them as signs of things that last forever.

**We hang these evergreens to signify the everlasting reign of Christ, and we ask God’s blessing on them and on ourselves.**

## *Blessing of the Christmas Tree*

Christmas trees have become a powerful symbol of popular culture, as iconic as the holiday itself. From Charlie Brown to Rockefeller Center, from the lawn of the White House to the living rooms of our own homes, Christmas trees represent the festivity and goodwill of the season.

The first use of the Christmas tree occurred in the medieval German Paradise Plays, which were held outdoors and portrayed the creation of humankind. The Tree of Life was a fir tree decorated with apples. Later other ornaments were hung upon them, such as paper flowers and gilded nuts.

Another story is told that on one Christmas Eve, Martin Luther wandered outdoors and became enraptured with the beauty of the starry sky, the brilliance of which led him to reflect on the glory of the first Christmas Eve as seen in Bethlehem's radiant sky. Wishing to share his enchantment with his family, Luther cut from the forest an evergreen and took it home placing candles on its boughs, lighting each candle one by one, teaching his children all the while about the stars in the firmament and the God who created them. The use of a candle-lighted tree spread throughout Europe and then the United States.<sup>3</sup>

We symbolize the goodwill and eternal nature of our God with our own trees, adorned with lights and ornaments to point us toward the glory of God's creation and the unyielding light of Christ.

We prepare for the coming of the Lord, rekindling our prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus," as we await his coming as the bright morning star.

**We hang these signs of Christ – lights, stars, and symbols of our King – to remind us of his identity and his story, as we ask God's blessing on them and on ourselves.**

## *Blessing of the Poinsettias*

Las Posadas is a time of celebration in Mexico and the Southwestern United States, with events signifying joy, protection, and festivity. Las Posadas traces its origin to Father Diego de Soria, an enthusiastic priest who brought the Roman Catholic faith to Mexico in 1587.

During the celebration, “pilgrims” journey from house to house led by “an angel” symbolizing the journey of Mary and Joseph who went from house to house seeking shelter. The pilgrims sing songs as they look for shelter, each house refusing refuge, until the master of the last house – the inn – opens the door and invites all the participates in to share in prayer, festivities, and a feast.<sup>4</sup>

The Poinsettia, which children may carry along the procession route during Las Posadas<sup>5</sup>, is native to our southern neighbors. It was named after Dr. Poinset, an ambassador to Mexico who first introduced it to the United States in 1828. The people of Mexico and Central America call the brilliant tropical plant the “Flower of the Holy Night,” and its shape – a many-pointed star – has become a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem.

Because these plants turn bright and lively in the cold, short days of winter, we see in our own native land echoes of a Christmas miracle.

**We place these blooming plants in sacred spaces to remind ourselves that Christ brings life to a suffering world, and we ask God’s blessing on them and on ourselves.**

## Blessing of the Crèche

One of the most prevalent images of Advent is the Nativity. The Nativity points to the great mystery of the incarnation – God, who chose to be born in human flesh; God, who chose to be born in low estate among the poor and powerless; God, who is without sin, yet entered into full humanity where sin is a cruel reality.

The Nativity reminds us, though, that Jesus is Emmanuel – literally, “God with us.” Whenever we see a Nativity, we find ourselves with Mary and Joseph, with the Shepherds and Magi, and with the women and men throughout history who have knelt before the manger overwhelmed by God’s expression of love come to us in human form.

As theologian Gustavo Gutierrez observed:

“He was born in Bethlehem, ‘one of the little clans of Judah,’<sup>6</sup> where at his birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors in the town, as the Gospels tell us [and] ... There on the fringe of society, ‘the Word became history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness; but we can say, too, that by this becoming, history itself, our history, became Word.’”<sup>7</sup>

May we remember the Messiah who came to live and dwell among us, a King not born in a palace but in a lowly stable.

**We place these figures in the nativity, recalling the wonderful mystery of the birth of our Savior, and we ask God’s blessing on them and on ourselves.**

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<sup>1</sup> adapted from liturgies provided by the Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 60:13

<sup>3</sup> augmented by a similar account at <http://www.judsonpress.com/img/cms/pdf/The%20Christmas%20Tree.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> augmented by accounts of Las Posadas at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las\\_Posadas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las_Posadas)

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las\\_Posadas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las_Posadas)

<sup>6</sup> Micah 5:1

<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, page 85