

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Hanging of the Greens

Blessing of the Wreaths

Like the never-dying evergreens, God's love for us will last forever. The wreaths are shaped into a circle to signify the never-ending love and reign of the Messiah. The wreath also signifies the crown – both a sign of the Kingship of Jesus and a reminder that for love of us, he wore a crown of thorns.

Blessing of the Tree, Lights

Reading John 1:1-5, 9-14a

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, [a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [a] ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, [b] and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, [c] full of grace and truth.

The advent Season is essentially one of light. Candles are lighted throughout the season to remind us that Jesus is “the light of the world.” Windows in homes and churches alike are decorated with candles that burn each night. This is a very old custom that sprang from the belief that the lighted windows would guide the Christ Child through the darkness to the house. Remember that Christ is ever present and that he is the “Tree of Life.” The lights on our tree remind us that the Christ Child came to earth as the “light of the world.”

Did you know that the tradition of putting lights on our trees started because of the starlight? The tradition goes that Martin Luther was walking home one evening and he saw the starlight glistening off the ice-covered boughs. It was so stunningly beautiful that he came home and had candles put on his Christmas tree so his family could see the radiant starlight that he saw, only indoors. The stars remind us of the first Christmas light when the Star of Bethlehem shone over the manger, directing the Wise Men and the shepherds to the place where Jesus was born.

In Ancient times, the cedar was known as the tree of royalty. Today we often use cedar, along with other greens – pine, fir, spruce, juniper and rosemary – which we prize for their fragrance as well as their symbolism of our expectation and hope of the coming of the Christ Child again. The

evergreen reminds us of the everlasting life given to us through the grace of God through the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Reading Isaiah 61:1-11

¹The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; ⁶but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. ⁷Because their[a] shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. ⁸For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; [b] I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. ¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

We cannot hear the words of Isaiah without thinking of the healing that the coming of Christ will bring. The evergreen most associated with healing in the ancient world was the mistletoe, at one time known as “All-Heal.” Today it is remembered as the plant of peace. Originally the kiss under the mistletoe was a kiss of peace, for when enemies happened to meet under the mistletoe in the forests; they threw down their arms and exchanged a friendly greeting.

Reading Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”[a]

CHRISMONS

At Christmas, not only does the star lead us to Bethlehem, but also Nazareth, Galilee, Capernaum, Jerusalem, Calvary, and heaven. For as part of Jesus' birth, we also celebrate his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and his ultimate victory over the powers of sin and death.

Like the three kings, we present our gifts to Jesus and to one another. Today we will present our offerings in the form of Chrismons. Chrismon is a combination of two words: Christ and MONogram. A Chrismon is a symbol of Christ.

Christian symbols date back to the early church. They are found on the walls of Roman catacombs, on jewelry and utensils from excavations in Palestine and elsewhere. Early Christians used them to identify themselves to one another, to designate meeting places, and sometimes, to show non-believers where they stood. These symbols of the early church served to transmit the faith and beliefs of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Chrismons were first used in 1957 to decorate a Christmas tree in the Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Danville, VA. They were made of white and gold materials. WHITE is symbolic of promised healing. The little white lights on the tree point to the Christ as the light of the world. Gold represents the precious love of God given to all Creation in the form of the child - Christ who comes to us.

Each Chrismon is described in Scripture and refers to some aspect of Jesus Christ. There are symbols for the Holy Trinity. God is One God, but there are three persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This shows the equality of the three persons. They are combined into the one figure to show that they are one with God. There are many crosses; in fact, there are over 400 different designs of the cross. The cross is the most visible symbol of the Christian church. Without Jesus' death on the cross, and resurrection from death, we would not have forgiveness. We would not have the promise of grace, nor of salvation. Shells remind us of our baptism, reminding us of the water when we were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Through the decorations on this tree the story of Jesus is told.

Chrismon Prayer

Almighty God, whose glory and majesty glows through the symbols of Christ, may these Chrismons ever remind us of your love entering our lives. May these gifts we hang upon the tree become the gifts of your comfort and joy for us to share with others. As we sing of redemption's happy dawn, as Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem, may we remember the heaven-born Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Blessing of the Nativity

The nativity reminds us of the wonderful love of God that came to earth in the form of this human baby, in the form of Jesus Christ who is revealed to us through the angels who announced the birth to the shepherd and to the Wise Men. The love of God has come to us in this unique way and continues to come to us in many ways as Christ's love is shown by and through each of us.

Reading Luke 2:8- 14

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, [a] the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, [b] praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"[c]

Present and Bless the Poinsettias

Blessing of the Poinsettias

We see flowers blooming in the summer but in the chill and ice of winter there are very few flowers that bloom. However, the Legend of the Poinsettia helps us to see why this flower is placed near the manger as a reminder of the love of Christ for each of us.

The legend goes like this: The story is told of Pepita, a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve Services. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness rather than joy. "I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said Pedro consolingly.

Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet. Looking at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel.

As she approached the altar, she remembered Pedro's kind words: "Even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." She felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene.

Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all that saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes.

From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the *Flores de Noche Buena*, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season. Today, the common name for this plant is the poinsettia.