

Sunday Homily  
Fourth Sunday of Advent B  
Lk 1:26-38  
December 18, 2011

By Deacon Jeff Claar

In that very first Advent of Mary's over 2000 years ago; our Blessed Virgin enters into a time of prayer and sacrifice to prepare for the first coming of Christ, known to her as her baby Jesus and now to us as Jesus Christ, our Savior.

And as an Advent symbol of God's fidelity, the Angel Gabriel informs Mary that a great sign is given: her cousin Elizabeth, even in her old age will conceive a son too. This son, known to Elizabeth as her baby John and now to us as John the Baptist, is no ordinary man, but the same John who was sent to prepare the way for the first coming of Jesus the Christ through prayer and sacrifice.

And today, the Church gives us our own symbol of prayer and sacrifice to help us prepare for the second coming of Christ. Prominently placed before us at the foot of the sanctuary is our Advent wreath, a symbol of God's fidelity to us and when fully appreciated, a great gift that calls us to prayer and sacrifice as we prepare to celebrate the birthday of baby Jesus.

Fr. William Saunders, the dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College gives us this explanation of our Advent wreath in his writing “the History of the Advent Wreath”.

The Advent Wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. Although the actual origins are uncertain, there is some evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold of winter as a sign of hope in the warmth of spring. In Scandinavia during winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn “the wheel of the earth” back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

During the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreathes as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. By 1600 AD, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath. And it wasn't until the 1900's that German immigrants brought this tradition to America.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens signifying continuous life and the circular shape of the wreath, which has no beginning or end,

symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, who entered our world becoming true God and true man.

The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. Three candles of purple and one of rose (as symbolized by our colored ribbons on each candle). The purple candles in particular symbolize the prayer, penance, and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday of rejoicing, because we have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, and Christmas is growing ever closer.

Our progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead. And the light given off by the candles symbolizes the light of Christ in our lives.

On this our fourth and final Sunday of Advent we can look to our Advent wreath with new eyes and a fresh determination to complete our own prayerful preparations for the birthday celebration soon to come.

Have we done all we can to be ready for the big day?

