

COMMENT

The Origin and Spread of the Advent Wreath

by MARY JANE HAEMIG

November and December bring church newsletters mentioning the allegedly “ancient” or “reformation-era” custom of the Advent wreath. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America website hints that the Advent wreath has deep historical roots, although it admits that the Advent wreath itself developed “a few centuries ago.”

The Advent wreath has its roots in the pre-Christian practices of northern Europe. People sought the return of the sun in the dark time of the year (at the winter solstice) by lighting candles and fires. As early as the Middle Ages, Christians used fire and light to represent Christ’s coming into the world. Using this same symbolism, the Advent wreath developed a few centuries ago in Germany as a sign of the waiting and hopeful expectation of the return in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The wreath, a circle, came to represent the eternal victory over death through Jesus Christ. The evergreens were a sign of the faithfulness of God to God’s people, even in death, and the lighted candles were a reminder of the light of Christ brought into the world.¹

A 1982 pamphlet, *The Story of the Advent Wreath* (Fortress), makes extensive claims concerning the Advent wreath:

Historically, the Advent wreath is traced to pagan sources. Some believe the wreath originated in Scandinavia. During the shortest days of the year, people placed lighted candles in a wheel. They prayed the god of light to turn the wheel of the earth toward the sun again and lengthen the days. The custom was adapted by the Christian Church to demonstrate that the people dwelling in darkness were so admirably given light by the Son of God. Since Advent sets a mood of waiting in the dark and since Christ was born on a day when light begins to gain ascendancy over the darkness, lighting the Advent wreath is a most appropriate custom. Later the practice spread to Central and Western Europe.

The form of a wreath evolved from the use of a simple spray of evergreen placed near the hearth. The evergreen symbolized the everlasting life found in Christ...

Bending the branch so that the ends touched formed a circle, further symbolizing life without end.²

Neither the website nor the pamphlet cites evidence for their claims.

Oddly, although literature in recent decades abounds with such references to the alleged ancient roots of this custom, little actual historical work has examined the origins, spread, and changing uses of the Advent wreath. At least one scholar, Laurence Hull Stookey, notes that the wreath and the spread of its use are relatively recent:

A way of marking the progress of Advent that was little known fifty years ago is now almost universally accepted . . . this is the Advent wreath, in which candles are lighted progressively, Sunday by Sunday. Because the wreath arose as a household custom in northern Europe, the church did not hedge it about with strict regulations (as likely would have been the case had its origin been the worship space of the congregation). Hence the forms of its use are so various as to be perplexing.³

A brief examination of relevant literature makes clear that the Advent wreath developed in nineteenth-century Germany and entered American Lutheran practice relatively recently. This literature also indicates that the original purpose of the Advent wreath was to aid a focus on Christmas itself rather than on Advent as a distinct season. A review of the origin and spread of the advent wreath also spurs thought generally on how devotional practices develop and spread and how they are understood.

Origins in Hamburg; Spread in Germany

Undoubtedly, several elements—evergreen boughs, candles, and the wreath form—have a long history of use in a variety of settings, some of them Christian. However, the Advent wreath itself, a wreath woven from evergreen boughs into which candles are inserted and which is used during the season of Advent, stems from nineteenth-century Germany.⁴

The creator of the Advent wreath as it is known today was the north German theologian Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881), head of the “Rauhe Haus” and father of the “Inner Mission” among German Protestant churches. The “Rauhe Haus,” founded

in 1833, served impoverished youth from the Hamburg slums. The children, divided into “house families” gathered during Advent in the afternoon for a short devotion and in the evenings for singing. In 1839 Wichern had a simple wooden candelabra hung in the prayer room. It had 23 candles: 19 small red ones for the weekdays and four large white ones for the Sundays.⁵ Wichern described the new custom:

Around the words of praise on the organ 23 colorful wax candles were arranged. With every promise one of the lights was kindled by brother Hansen, so that in the end all 23 like a shining wreath surrounded with light the praise of the Lord. All this served to educate and to build strength and joy in the Lord.⁶

In 1851 the prayer room was decorated with fresh pine boughs. And nine years later the inhabitants of the “Rauhe Haus” wove the ever-green boughs into the wagon wheel sized candelabra. The wreath hung in the middle of the room through the last day of Advent.⁷

Pastor Martin Hennig who grew up in the Rauhe Haus in the nineteenth century, reported on practices at that time. Christmas began in the Rauhe Haus with the celebration of Advent. Hennig reported the congregation gathered on the afternoon of Advent I in the “Prayer Room:” (Betsaal)

Without coercion and, despite the serious nature of Advent, I must say all was celebrated joyously. On the candelabra . . . [that] had places for 28 lights, a large candle burned. On each weekday another small one and on each Sunday a large candle [was lit]. Different Advent songs, and with the advancing Advent season, also Christmas songs were sung. My father read a Bible passage and commented on it. Father explained how an Advent or a Christmas song came to be, or something else fitting for the Advent season.⁸

Hennig reported that in later years a small Advent wreath came to be used on the coffee table but does not state precisely when this was. These reports of the custom of the Rauhe Haus are apparently the earliest evidence of the *Advent* wreath.

The spread of the custom was probably due to several factors. Deacons, educated by Wichern in the Rauhe Haus, may have taken the Advent wreath tradition to their places of work in congregations and institutions of the Inner Mission. Even Wichern himself apparently

aided its spread: He took a position in Berlin in 1857 and approximately three years later the Tegel orphanage replaced its candelabra with a wreath of pine boughs.⁹

The German youth movement played a role in the spread of the Advent wreath. This movement, which began before the first World War, developed a very sentimental enthusiasm for nature that was related more to pagan than to Christian concepts of seasons. The youth movement celebrated solstices; pictures from the first quarter of the twentieth century show green bushes and branches in its meeting rooms. Wreaths of lights appear too—not just before Christmas but also in fall and winter. These were certainly not Advent wreaths but the enthusiasm of the youth movement for such matters certainly prepared the way for the general adoption of the Advent wreath. In Austria and Switzerland it was these youth groups that first introduced the custom.¹⁰ While the influence of the youth movement was key, it was not the only impulse pushing the Advent wreath.

Several other elements aided the spread of the custom. The youth movement was one of several renewal movements, including artistic movements, active in Germany at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. The emphasis on the arts led to an orientation to the rhythms of natural life and to popular forms of artistic expression. The spread of the Advent wreath may have been related to these artistic movements.¹¹ Another impulse was World War I. Some have claimed that the Advent wreath developed in north German army camps during that war. While this seems unlikely, given the evidence cited above, it is plausible that the custom was frequently used in and may have spread from such camps. Not only were men from different parts of the country in such camps but also they may have been particularly receptive to such a custom at this time, precisely because it combined a vague nature piety with Christian concepts and because the new custom also had a patriotic patina.¹²

Research done for the “Atlas der deutschen Volkskunde” traced the spread of the Advent wreath. An office, founded in 1928, overseeing this work conducted many surveys concerning the customs and culture of Germany. Three questions concerned the Advent wreath: a) During the season of Advent, is a wreath (Advent wreath) hung in a room? b) Is this wreath decorated with lights? How many?

c) If the custom is new, since when, approximately, has it been done? The results of the survey showed that the custom originated in North Germany and spread from there. The custom was not ancient but arose in the relatively recent past. The survey also showed that the origin must have been a Protestant one; the Roman Catholic south and southeast of Germany showed marked resistance to the custom. Many completed surveys noted specifically that the Advent wreath was known only in Protestant families. The survey shows that industrial areas were more open to the use of the Advent wreath than rural ones. In industrial cities the confessional boundary was breached as well. Finally, the survey showed that this custom did not arise from the lower levels of society but rather was introduced by the upper classes and spread by their example.¹³

A brief internet search shows that not only Lutherans but Roman Catholics as well are susceptible to the myth of the antiquity of the Advent wreath. For example, one Roman Catholic website reports:

The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. . . .

By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas . . . By 1600, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.¹⁴

Roman Catholic scholarly literature knows better. The 1957 article on Advent in the *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche* (second edition) notes a number of customs associated with Advent and comments that the Advent wreath, a more recent development, portrays the gradually growing light and the coming of Christ.¹⁵ The third edition of the *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche* (1993) notes that "The most-loved Advent custom today is the Advent wreath" and that it originated in the context of Protestant households, has become more widespread since 1930, and is "generally found in Catholic churches after World War II."¹⁶

On the American Lutheran scene

While thorough research on the spread of the Advent wreath among American Lutherans is lacking, a sampling of popular publi-

cations from Lutheran church bodies in North America indicates that the use of the Advent wreath in homes or in church is a relatively recent development. A perusal of the September-December issues from 1930-1939 of the *Lutheran Standard*, magazine of the American Lutheran Church (the result of a merger between three predominantly nineteenth-century German immigrant synods) turns up no mention of the Advent wreath. That the custom was apparently not widely known among these relatively recent German Lutheran immigrants and their children is reinforced by the appearance in the publication of a short article at the end of the decade. "A Fine Advent Custom" in the December 9, 1939, issue mentions that a reader has brought to their attention "a fine way to celebrate Advent—in the home." It cites an article in *The Woman's Home Companion*:

From Europe there came to America . . . the custom of gathering, prior to the first Sunday in Advent, fir and spruce boughs, saturating them in water, and arranging them in a heavy jar that contains water. These Advent boughs are placed on a table in the home and on the boughs—or near them, in candlesticks—are arranged four small candles and one large "Gospel candle." Then, on each of the four Sundays in Advent, the family gathers about this table at dusk. The tall Gospel candle is lighted by a parent and the first of the small candles is lighted by the youngest child. "Then the story of the first Christmas, as told in one of the Gospels, is read, followed by Christmas poems, stories, carols and hymns—each selecting a favorite in turn . . ." The next Sunday evening one more candle is lighted, so that there are two small candles burning as well as the tall Gospel candle. This is repeated, with the lighting of one more small candle each week, on the third and fourth Sunday. Of course, on the fourth Sunday all the candles are burning and the children realize that Christmas is here.¹⁷

Several things are striking about this account, aside from the relatively recent date. First, the focus is Christmas, not Advent. The story of Christmas is read, Christmas poems and hymns are used. The advent season is not a distinct focus. Second, this is a custom for use in the home, not the church. The article continues "With a view to the practical, the writer in the *Companion* advises changing the water in the jar each week and sprinkling the boughs to prevent drying."

A 1954 article in the *Lutheran Standard* specifically mentions an Advent wreath among pre-Christmas customs. The stated goal is to help children "to know the Christ whose birthday we celebrate . . ." The

focus is clearly Christmas, not Advent, as the article is titled “Keep Christmas Early!”¹⁸ The article mentions two “pre-Christmas” observances. One involves candles for an Advent *loda*, a two-by-four painted purple and edged with radiator gilt, with four candles. The author describes family devotional services on Sundays involving lighting the candles, singing Christmas carols, reading portions of the Christmas story, prayer, and a benediction. The article continues under the subheading “Then There’s the Advent Wreath.” It notes that “Some homes make use of an *Advent wreath*.” It directs “The wreath is made by boring holes for the twenty-eight ‘daily candles’ and four larger candles which are lit on each Sunday in Advent.” A wooden base on which the wreath is mounted should be “about twelve to fifteen inches across.” It notes “One candle is lit the first day in Advent, two for the second, and so on. Most families seem to choose evening for the candle-lighting and may use this time for family devotions. The idea is much the same as the *Advent lodas*.” Note that the Advent wreath described is significantly different from that used today. With its candles for all Advent days, not just Sundays, the wreath resembles that originally used by Wichern. The juxtaposition of wreath and *loda* seems to indicate that one custom did not predominate. No claim is made about the antiquity of either custom. The focus is not Advent, but rather Christmas, with Christmas readings and hymns used.

The 1950s saw some claims for the allegedly ancient roots of the Advent wreath. A booklet, *Advent in the Home*,¹⁹ claims that the Advent wreath might have originated with the sun-worshipping tribes of northern Europe, who decorated it with greens and lights and strung it up in their halls.

To appease their ‘hidden’ god during the darkest winter days they took a wheel from their cart, sacrificing, as it were, its use, while they pondered about the blessings of light and life and prayed the sun god to return to them.

The Christians preparing for their feast of light and life, the birth of the Savior, found this wheel or wreath an appropriate means. Adding one light for each of the four Sundays in Advent, they think about the darkness without God after the Fall of Adam into sin, and the growing hope for salvation...²⁰

No evidence is cited for the historical claims made. The booklet describes “Methods of Making the Wreath” and then states “During

Advent the Wreath should be the focal point for family devotions. Gathered around its gleaming candles, the family should daily prepare for the coming of Christ. The wreath should be prepared on the Saturday before the first Sunday and be blessed in the home."²¹ A form for "The Blessing of the Wreath" follows.

It is unclear exactly when the Advent wreath began to move into public worship settings. The cover of the December 10, 1958, issue of *The Lutheran*, publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, exhibits a picture of two acolytes lighting candles on a large advent wreath hung over an altar. The heading states "Lighting the Advent Wreath; An old church custom is being revived." But the articles by Robert A. Bartels in this and preceding and succeeding issues describe a family (home) devotional plan for advent observance.²² The first article "Get Ready for an Advent Adventure" states that "... Advent needs to be restored to its rightful place... [Advent is] a period for the quiet and meditative preparation for Christmas." The article goes on to state that

An old custom which helped to keep Christmas out of Advent was that of making and using an Advent wreath and candles. They served as a "reminding device," to deepen the Christian meaning of Advent and to hold before the memory the fact that the family or the worshipers at church were to make themselves ready for the announcement of the Lord's appearance at Christmas time.²³

These statements are remarkable both for their claim that the Advent wreath is an "old" custom and for the claim that its focus is Advent itself, with the specific purpose of keeping Christmas out of Advent. The first article contains instructions for making an Advent wreath, stating that the wreath consists of evergreen boughs affixed to a circular ring. Four candles—white or violet—were placed in four evenly spaced holes. It then promises that "In succeeding articles, an order for devotions to be conducted around the wreath on the evening set aside each week in Advent for the family activities will be given." For example, the instructions for the "family night" for the second week in Advent begin by stating "Light two candles in your Advent wreath before you begin the family devotions." It then continues with the singing of a hymn, an introit, scripture, a prescribed prayer, and the Lord's prayer.²⁴

A lengthier consideration of the history of the Advent wreath might consider why the Advent wreath has become popular while other Advent customs have receded. The 1954 *Lutheran Standard* article cited above mentions both the Advent wreath and the Advent log. *A Book of Advent* (1958) contains a chapter "Advent in Symbols" in which Advent candles, the Advent wreath, and the Advent log are described.²⁵ The November 28, 1962, issue of *The Lutheran Companion*, publication of the Augustana Synod, describes an Advent log used by Trinity parish of Unity, Wisconsin. This log—with four candles and decorated with pine cones—was designed to serve as a family devotional center. A 1966 book aimed at Lutherans encourages the use of a "Jesse Tree" described as "a small tree decorated with symbols portraying the spiritual heritage of Jesus."²⁶ A consideration of why some practices become traditions and others are forgotten may provide useful perspectives on ecclesiastical practices.

Another topic to ponder is how Advent candles received their names, colors, and alleged significance. *A Book of Advent* (1958)²⁷ claims the Advent candles have names: the prophecy candle, the Bethlehem candle, the shepherds' candle, and the angels' candle. A 1981 work claims "It is an old custom to light four candles in the season of Advent," and also names them the candles of prophecy, Bethlehem, shepherds, and angels, but gives no historical basis for its claims.²⁸ The 1982 Fortress Press pamphlet declares:

The candles signified God's Son as the light of the world. Customarily, there are four candles for the four weeks of Advent, and sometimes a central candle, known as the Christ candle. The Advent candles are lighted throughout Advent, but the Christ candle is not lighted until Christmas Eve. Traditionally, the four Advent candles are purple, though sometimes a pink or rose colored candle is used for the third Sunday in Advent and the following week. In contemporary practice, four blue candles are used. The Christ candle is white.²⁹

Here too it appears the "tradition" in regard to colors and names is recent. Stookey comments on the confusion as to colors and significance. He notes that some Advent wreaths use four colored candles on the four Advent Sundays but substitute four white candles on Christmas Eve and continue to use the wreath, with all candles lighted, through Christmas. Other wreaths have five candles, includ-

ing a fifth larger candle (the “Christ” candle) in the center which is first lit on Christmas Eve. He continues:

Nor is the color of the candles uniform. In the early stages of use, at least, often all four candles were white or perhaps red (for no better reason than that red and green connote Christmas). But an alternative was to use colors to match the liturgical color of the season. So four violet (or purple) candles came into use among Protestants. Shortly, however, even Protestant supply houses began to mimic an obsolete Roman Catholic custom; it had been the practice among Catholics to use rose (mistakenly called “pink”) on Gaudete Sunday as a visual signal that the intense solemnity of the “violet Sundays” eased off for this occasion. So Advent kits are still sold containing three violet and one rose candle; never mind that Advent is no longer penitential in the Roman Church . . . Most Protestants have no idea on which Sunday to light the “pink” candle for the first time, let alone why. Now that some denominations have gone to blue as the designated color for Advent, in those churches four blue candles may be used . . .³⁰

Stookey also notes that recently “another layer of symbolism has been added, without necessarily happy results.” The practice of giving separate significance to each candle has either had the candle representing some set of abstract virtues, for example, faith, hope, love, and joy or persons, Mary and Joseph, angels, shepherds, and the Magi. He then comments “ . . . all attempts to differentiate each candle with arbitrary designations obscure the basic symbol of accumulating light . . . ”³¹

Some concluding thoughts

How and why does a practice become a tradition, even an allegedly venerable tradition? This brief survey reveals that the Advent wreath is of nineteenth-century German origin and has been a relative late-comer to American Lutheran homes and churches. It should cause us to reflect on how quickly practices become traditions. It serves as a useful reminder that not all practices among Christians, however helpful and/or appealing, are “ancient” or “reformation-era.” It should also cause us to ask why distant historical origins are ascribed when no scholarly basis for the claim exists. Given the presence of other devotional aids, such as logs, among American Lutherans, the

growing dominance of the Advent wreath should lead us to reflect on why and how some practices become dominant while others do not. The various meanings assigned to wreaths and candles should also lead us to reflect on how such meanings develop. Observing that the focus of the Advent wreath has moved from Christmas to Advent, we should consider how the perception and use of the Advent wreath and of Advent itself among American Lutherans have changed.

NOTES

1. http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/faq/worship_space/print/advent_wreath.html
2. *The Story of the Advent Wreath* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 6-7.
3. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar. Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 126-127.
4. Hermann Bausinger, "Der Adventskranz: Ein methodisches Beispiel," in *Wuerttembergisches Jahrbuch fuer Volkskunde* (1970) 9-31; Dietrich Sattler, ed. *Der Adventskranz und seine Geschichte: Braeuche und Feste in der Advents- und Weihnachtszeit* (Hamburg: Agentur des Rauhen Hauses, 1997)
5. Sattler 6-8.
6. Sattler 8. "Um den Lobesspruch an der Orgel waren 23 bunte Wachslichter aufgestellt. Mit jeder Verheissung wurde eines der Lichter von Bruder Hansen angezündet, so dass zuletzt alle 23 wie ein Strahlenkranz das Lob des Herrn umleuchteten. Das Ganze diente ebenso wie zu Erbauung als Stärkung und Freude im HERRN." Sattler does not give an adequate reference for this.
- In 1850 Wichern mentioned the Advent custom in a letter: "Mit dem ersten Advent beginnen unsere kurzen besondern Adventandachten; in der Mittagsstunde 10 Minuten vor dem Essen tritt von da an die ganze Hausgenossenschaft im Betsaal zusammen. Wir lesen von einem Adventstag zum andern eine Verheissung von der Zukunft des Herrn... Dass dazu jedesmal von Tag zu Tag ein Adventslicht mehr auf dem Kronleuchter des Betsaals angezündet wird, bis die ganze Krone im Licht erglänzt, ist der Kinder Lust, aber auch die Lust von uns Erwachsenen..." Johann Hinrich Wichern, *Samtliche Werke* ed. Peter Meinhold. (Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1980) 8: 38.
7. Sattler 8.
8. Bausinger, 13 Zwanglos und trotz des Ernstes des Advents, muss ich wohl sagen, froehlich ging alles zu. Auf dem Leuchter aus der Kirche Wank, der Herrn Wichern oder meinem Vater geschenkt war und der Platz fuer 28 Lichter hatte, brannte eine grosse Kerze. An jedem Wochentag kam eine kleine, sonntags, eine grosse Kerze hinzu. Verschiedene Adventslieder, mit dem Vorruecken der Adventszeit auch Weihnachtslieder, wurden gesungen. Dazu las Vater ein Bibelwort und legte es kurz aus. Vater erzählte, wie ein Advents- oder Weihnachtslied entstanden war, oder etwas, was zur Adventszeit passte. [a footnote references *Der Rauhaeusler Bote*, Hamburg, Advent 1964, p. 3f]

- 9 Sattler 8-10
- 10 Bausinger 14
- 11 Bausinger 14-15
- 12 Bausinger 15
- 13 Bausinger, 15-18
- 14 William Saunders, "The History of the Advent Wreath," <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/reo132.html>
- 15 *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd edition (Freiburg Herder, 1957) "Advent" by M.-L. Lechner, Vol. 1, 161
- 16 *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd edition (Freiburg Herder, 1993) "Advent" by Annemarie Bruckner, Vol. 1, 173 "Beliebtester A-Brauch ist heute der A-Kranz, weiter verbreitet seit 1930, aus haeusl prot Umkreis herkommend, nach dem 2 Weltkrieg auch in kath Kirchen allgemein anzutreffen"
- 17 "A Fine Advent Custom," *Lutheran Standard*, December 9, 1939, 3
- 18 Wilson C Egbert, "Keep Christmas Early!" *Lutheran Standard*, November 27, 1954, 21
- 19 *Advent in the Home* (Ridgefield Park, NJ Una Sancta Press, 1956)
- 20 Ibid 2-3
- 21 Ibid 3
- 22 *The Lutheran*, November 19, 1958, 21-22, November 26, 1958, 28-29, December 3, 1958, 23-24, December 10, 1958, 28-29, December 17, 1958, 25-26
- 23 *The Lutheran*, November 19, 1958, 21
- 24 *The Lutheran*, December 3, 1958, 23
- 25 Victor E Beck and Paul M Lindberg, *A Book of Advent with Daily Devotions* (Rock Island Augustana, 1958), 7-11
- 26 Raymond and Georgene Anderson, *The Jesse Tree The Herntage of Jesus in Stories and Symbols of Advent for the Family* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1966) 6
- 27 Beck and Lindberg, 7
- 28 Richard Simon Hanson, *The Comings of God Meditations for the Advent Season* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1981) 7
- 29 *Story of the Advent Wreath*, 7
- 30 Stookey, 127-128
- 31 Stookey, 128

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