

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2021

Introduction

I want to talk about the symbolism of the Advent wreath. The Advent wreath is full of symbolism. So, for example, three out of the five candles are purple, because purple is the color of royalty, and Jesus entered the world as a king. But, the most obvious symbolism is the candles themselves: the first representing hope, the second representing peace, the third representing joy, the fourth representing love, and the fifth, which we lit tonight, representing the light and purity of Christ.

I want to reflect with you briefly tonight about what these candles symbolize and how they should inform how we celebrate Christmas.

I should give a disclaimer: Christians do certain things, because God directly commands us to do them through his word. Christians baptize and take the Lord's Supper together, because they are direct commands in Scripture.

But, an Advent wreath, on the other hand, is simply a tradition. And, it's very important that we distinguish biblical commands from traditions. Traditions are optional and change over time, but commands are not. I've been a member of congregations who have used an Advent wreath and congregations that haven't, and both ways of doing it are perfectly fine.

But, I think the Advent wreath is a good tradition, and here's why: the Advent wreath symbolizes things that are biblical and deeply true. So, if we understand what the Advent wreath symbolizes, it can help us focus on what the Bible teaches about Jesus, and that's a very good thing.

With the rest of our time tonight, I want to briefly focus on each candle with you, starting with the candle symbolizing hope.

Hope

The first candle symbolizes hope. But, many times, people use the word "hope" basically as a synonym for "wish." When someone says, "I hope I get the gifts that I asked for this Christmas," the word "hope" basically means "wish."

I have a friend who served in the United States Army as a Green Beret, and he told me once that the word "hope" is off limits when planning a mission. If soldiers are in a planning meeting, and

someone says, “I hope I can get the helicopters there in time for extraction,” that’s a clear sign that the mission isn’t ready.

But, that’s not the type of hope that we celebrate at Christmas. In the Bible, hope isn’t a wish, and it’s not a feeling that everything will work out okay. Instead, hope is a rock solid confidence that God is good for his word. In the Bible, hope is a confident expectation that God will do what he promised.

Christmas is about that kind of hope. In the Old Testament, there is prophecy on prophecy on prophecy about a future king, the Messiah. In every case, these prophecies were made several centuries before Jesus was born, and in some cases, they were made over a thousand years before his birth. But, God kept every single one of his promises by sending Jesus.

As they say, the best predictor of future performance is past performance. God has proven himself trustworthy in the past, so we can hope in him for the future. Hebrews 10:23 says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” So, let’s hope in God, because he has proven himself faithful over and over and over again.

So, friends, may your celebration of Christmas be full of hope.

Peace

Now, let’s talk about the second candle, which symbolizes peace.

As we read earlier in Luke 2, the angels said to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

I’m reading a book about the American Civil War, and one thing that has interested me is that both sides of the conflict—the United States and the Confederacy—wanted peace, but here was the question: on whose terms? You see, peace on the terms of the Confederacy would’ve meant their independence from the United States and the continuation of slavery. But, the Confederacy lost the war, and they got peace, but it was peace on the terms of the United States.

I think that everyone wants peace, especially at Christmas. But, the question is, on whose terms? You see, the peace celebrated at Christmas is a peace on God’s terms.

What are those terms? Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” So, the terms of God’s peace are faith in

Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, we can experience peace with God, peace with others, and peace with ourselves.

So, Christmas presents us with a question: will we accept the peace that God offers?

And, friends, this is a really, really good peace to experience. You see, the message of Christmas is such, such good news. The world, our world, had rejected God. But, God entered a world in rebellion against him with an announcement of peace. God didn't charge into our world and crush his enemies; he offered every single one of us peace through faith in his Son, Jesus.

So, friends, may your celebration of Christmas be full of peace.

I hope you can see something by this point: the hope and peace celebrated at Christmas aren't vague or abstract ideas meant to make us feel good inside; no, they're specific and concrete things connected to a person, Jesus. As we're going to see, that's true for joy, love, and light too.

Joy

Now, let's talk about the third candle, which symbolizes joy.

According to the angel who spoke to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, he had "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). But, what was that good news? The angel went on, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). The "good news of great joy" is that a Savior had been born. Like the angel commanded Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mat 2:21).

Sin is our biggest problem, our greatest enemy, and our most deadly disease. But, Jesus can and will save everyone of us from it. What better reason could there be for joy?

But, here's a question: what if we're not joyful? What if we hear that Jesus is a Savior, and we get that feeling that we get when we know that something is good news, but we've already heard it so many times? What do we do when we know that something should make us happy, but we don't feel happy?

That's a big question, but part of the answer is that we have to slow down and reflect on what's really true, and Christmas Eve is a great time to do it. We have to slow down and remember that Jesus is a Savior. Jesus is the Messiah. And, we are sinners. So, we need Jesus desperately. And,

God gave him to us. I believe that if we slow down and reflect on those realities, we'll experience joy. And, brothers and sisters, we have to pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to feel what we should feel in response to what God has done.

So, friends, may your celebration of Christmas be full of joy.

Love

Now, the fourth candle symbolizes love.

God sending his Son was a profound act of love. Just like the love of a parent precedes the love of a child, the love of God comes before our love for him.

I want to read a longer passage which explains this beautifully. First John 4:7–12 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

God loved us when we didn't love him. God showed his love by sending Jesus to become a human being. God knew that his Son would live a life full of suffering and hardship that would end in death. But, he planned it that way and freely gave him to the world anyway. So, let's be staggered by the love of God this Christmas.

And, like John says, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). God loving us should lead us to love others. In a tiered fountain, the water in the higher levels overflows and spills into the lower levels. Like that, the love of God should overflow from our lives into the lives of others.

So, friends, I would simply encourage you to love others as you celebrate Christmas. Many of us will be tempted to make this Christmas about ourselves—what we receive, what others do for us, how we want others to act, or how hard we have to work. But, let me invite you to take a different path. Reflect on how God loved you before you loved him and use that as an opportunity to make Christmas about what you can give and what you can do for others.

So, friends, may your celebration of Christmas be full of love.

Christ

Now, the fifth candle, which we lit tonight, symbolizes Christ. To be specific, it represents the light of Christ entering the world, which is why it is white.

I want to remind you of some words that we've already read this evening. John 1:4–5 says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1:9 says, "The true light which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."

If I blew out all the candles but the white one, then I turned off every light in this room, the light from the white candle would still create light, wouldn't it? What if the room got darker? What if we covered every window and created the deepest darkness that we could in this room? Well, the light would still shine. Once that light starts, the darkness can never overcome it, no matter how deep it is.

In the same way, once Jesus entered the world, there was nothing that darkness could do to put out the light of his life. In this world, there is deep spiritual darkness. But, no matter how deep that darkness gets, Jesus, the true light, has entered the world, and the darkness can't overcome him.

Of course, it's not a perfect analogy, because all that needs to happen for this light to go out is for me or someone else to walk up to it and blow it out. But, like Hebrews 7:16 says, Jesus has "the power of an indestructible life." When Jesus was crucified, it looked like the light of his life had been blown out, but he rose from the dead. So, the life of Christ isn't delicate and vulnerable, like this candle; it's more like a raging bonfire.

So, whatever your circumstances are this Christmas, be encouraged, because the light of Christ is shining in the darkness, and it will never be put out. I don't say that lightly, because I know the struggles, sadness, and discouragement that many of the people in this room are facing.

I'm sure that many of you will go home tonight and spend time looking at a Christmas tree. As you do that, I'd encourage you to remember the light of the life of Jesus Christ as you look at those lights shining in the darkness. Whatever your circumstances, the light of Christ has started shining and will never be put out.

Conclusion

Tonight, I've reflected on hope, peace, joy, love, light, and how each of those things is connected to the coming of Jesus into the world. I hope that each of your Christmas celebrations are marked by reflection on these things.

As a final word, Christmas is a time for reflection, and it's a time when we think about the reality of Jesus more deeply. I'm sure that there are people listening to me tonight who have never repented of their sin and put their trust in Jesus. If that's the case, you're not experiencing hope, peace, joy, love, and light through Jesus. But, you can. And, here's how: stop living for yourself, and put your trust in Jesus to save you from your sins.

Prayer

Father, we praise you and thank you for sending Jesus into the world to save sinners like us. I pray that each of the individuals and families represented here tonight will experience hope, peace, joy, love, and light through your Son as they celebrate Christmas. Of course, we know that this can only come by the work of your Holy Spirit, so I ask, in the name of Jesus, that you will work among us by your Holy Spirit to make these things realities in our hearts. Amen.