

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Don't you just love the Advent wreath? Think about the symbolism. Look at the greens. They look like they come from an evergreen tree. Well, okay, these came from a plastic factory, but this actually strengthens the symbol. Real evergreen branches would eventually turn brown and the needles would fall off. But this Advent wreath is always green, the color of living plants. Green reminds us of life. 'Ever-green' says 'eternal life.' \* We receive eternal life through Jesus, whom we will soon represent by a white candle in the middle of our Advent wreath on Christmas Eve. \* And what do you do with candles? You light 'em, a reminder that Jesus is the light of the world, the one who helps us push back against the darkness of sin in our own lives. \* Our Advent wreath is adorned with four blue candles. What does blue remind us of? The sky. The sky has finally been blue lately, but all those cloudy skies we had in the previous 30 days actually strengthen the symbol. Even when the sky is overcast for most of Advent, we can come into God's house and see blue candles and blue paraments, and be reminded of the blue sky. \* What's so special about the sky? That's the next place the world is going to see Jesus, coming back to earth from above. And when he

comes, he'll bring awesome stuff with him like the fullness of purity. Right now God says we are pure in his sight because of Jesus. But at the second coming of Christ, we will be made pure, just as Jesus is pure, like the pure white candle that will soon appear in the middle of our Advent wreath. Don't you just love the Advent wreath?

Don't you wish you could take it with you everywhere? Ooo, even better, you can be an Advent wreath, a living, breathing, walking, talking Advent wreath. I can see the greens surrounding you right now because you already have eternal life through faith in Jesus. Just as we will put a white candle in the middle of the Advent wreath, Jesus has become the center of your faith-life. So you've got greens, and you've got a white candle. You need four more candles to turn you into a living Advent wreath. Today's epistle lesson points at **FOUR** things that can serve as **CANDLES FOR YOUR ADVENT WREATH**. Here are four ways for you to adorn your life as someone who belongs to Jesus.

The first candle is **joy**. *<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice.* "Rejoice Sunday" is just what we need in the middle of December. Why? Because we've got so much in our lives for which to be sour-pusses! Consider the broken stuff we have.

Some of us have broken bank accounts because someone else we know has a broken life and we've been helping them. There's probably something broken on your car or in your home. Some of you have broken health. Then there are the broken promises which led to broken hearts and sometimes broken homes. All things considered, December seems like a fine time to be depressed! Consider some of our unrealistic expectations which inevitably lead to the blues. We dream about having a Christmas that's just right. Why? Because we like all the holiday TV and movie specials with happy endings: family members work out their differences, and everybody's happy. Or we're really good at fantasizing about how things used to be when we were younger, or when certain loved ones were still with us. You know how it works: we forget the bad parts of an experience, and we take a good memory of a short moment in our history, and we greatly expand it into the memory of a whole good day. It's really too bad that when you get around family, you are getting around sinners, the kind who can really irritate you. We have a lot for which to be anything but joyful.

So did the apostle Paul. When he wrote our sermon text, he wanted to be doing mission work in Spain, making friends and explaining to them about Jesus. But where was he? Chained to a Roman soldier, in prison for more than

two years already. And would you believe it? this apostle-guy has the nerve to come to us in the middle of December and say something cheerful like: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice.* What nerve! But he's right. Did you catch the key phrase? *Rejoice in the Lord.* This joy isn't a silly denial of real life circumstances. Pain is still pain, even for Christians. But in our pain, we can say with Job, "*I know that my Redeemer lives.*" Jesus was born. He lived for me. He died for me. He lives again. Therefore I am forgiven. This pain is not my payment for sins. I hurt right now, but I won't in heaven. Therefore I can rejoice already now. And I am looking for ways to express my happiness in my life." *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice.*

Whenever we don't feel godly joy, we need Christmas—not the opening of gifts with family, but the baby in the manger, true God yet true man, here to grow up and rescue us from sin and all its consequences. Jesus is what we need. Think about it. Would you let your child suffer for someone else? If you're sad, sit quietly and ponder how much God must love you to send his own Son for you. Then watch your joy-candle light up in flame. Ah, the first of four candles in the Advent wreath of your Christian life burns bright with godly joy.

Let's add the second candle. <sup>5</sup>*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* The Greek word for "gentleness" is one of those words that wants to say so much more than one English word can put across. It wants to say, "Hey, followers of Jesus, be 'gracious, reasonable, yielding, considerate, forbearing.'" In other words let it be evident to everyone that you are willing to yield your rights, not like a person who is weak or soft, but like Jesus did when he willingly left his throne in heaven to be laid in a manger as a baby for your benefit. *Let your gentleness be evident to all.* This Greek word for gentleness describes someone who has a superior argument or rank or position, and yet defers kindly to someone of an inferior position in order to benefit that person. Fathers do this when they pretend their five-year-old has pinned them to the carpet in a game of living-room-wrestling. Christians do this when they overlook insults, especially the unintended variety. Meanwhile the world blusters about, finding insults where none was intended.

*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* That's not a threat, as if to say, "Be gentle or else the Lord will be rough with you." It's a reminder that Jesus is coming back soon. That's what makes this Epistle lesson so fitting for Advent. *The Lord is near.* His return is nearer now than it was last

December. In January, Jesus will be even nearer. In February, nearer still. Do you see what this means? You get to be an Advent wreath all year round. Since the Lord's return is always getting nearer, we are always in a time of Advent. Light that candle of gentleness any time you need to remember, "Life's too short to spend it bickering. I wish to be gentle and yielding in all matters except God's Word. There I will not yield because God's Word tells me about my sin and my Savior."

The first candle is joy, the second gentleness. The third candle is **prayer**. <sup>6</sup>*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* When Greek-speaking people in Bible times said, "I feel anxious," their word meant, "I feel like I'm being pulled in several different directions at the same time." Do you ever feel anxious like that? This life presents many opportunities for fretting. And just think how many of them we've been authorized to worry about. Let's count 'em. Huh! Not one single thing! We've been authorized to worry about nothing. "Pastor, worry about nothing? What about all the bad stuff that might happen?" Yes, take all the prudent measures you can so that you are managing well all the stuff God has put you in charge of. But the rest—lay it all at the feet of King Jesus and walk away. How? Light your third Advent

candle: prayer. God wants us to bring all our requests, all our prayers, all our petitions to him. He cares for us. There's no matter too large for him to take charge of. There's no matter too small for you to pray about, not even a hangnail.

But when you come to God, bring more than your "please may I have" prayers. Come with thanks. Tell the Lord what you appreciate about the way he's directing your life. There's always something you can thank God for. The apostles Paul and Silas sang songs of praise and thanks after they had been flogged and thrown in jail. A friend of mine who is over 90 and can't do much anymore always has something to give thanks about when I visit. God's Word teaches us that thanksgiving is always an appropriate prayer. Every time you thank God, it's like relighting your third candle. What can you thank God for to keep your prayer candle lit?

We're ready for the fourth candle in the Advent wreath of our Christian living: **peace**. *<sup>1</sup>The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Long-time Lutherans recognize this as the Bible verse our preachers traditionally speak after the sermon. It's an excellent choice. The best thing we could possibly have is peace, God's kind of peace, the kind which comes when the Holy Spirit convinces us that

Jesus really has paid for all our sins, and therefore we are at peace with God. It's the kind of peace that is ours because of the first Christmas.

The unbelieving world and our sinful flesh doesn't really understand this peace. They are always striving for peace, and they find a kind of peace, but it's the kind that appeals to short-term reason. It's the kind of peace you get from a new toy or a new outfit or a new vehicle or a new promotion. It's good peace, but it appeals to short-term reason, and can easily become a substitute for the peace of God. The peace of God rises above reason and intellect and emotion. The peace of God stands guard at the gate of our hearts and our minds, yes, even of our Christian existence. Whenever temptations come knocking, the peace of God tells us, "Jesus doesn't want me to let this in." Whenever Satan uses his bullhorn to shout, "God hates you; that's why you have all this trouble; you deserve to be sad," the peace of God says, "How can that be true when Jesus paid my debts to God and then rose from the dead?" With such a <sup>4</sup>**peace-soldier** standing guard over our hearts and minds, we have every reason to <sup>1</sup>**rejoice**, be <sup>2</sup>**gentle** and <sup>3</sup>**present our requests** to God. With all four of these candles lit on the Advent wreath of our Christian lives, God has made us ready for whatever comes next.