

EVERLASTING
Light

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*A Resource for
Advent Worship*

Sandy Dixon



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Cover art: Wreath photo by Skjold
Cover: Michael H. Domínguez
Art direction: Michael H. Domínguez
Interior design: Wynn Younker

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

06 07 08 09 10 11

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dixon, Sandy
Everlasting light : a resource for Advent worship / Sandy Dixon.
82 p. ; 22 cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-13: 978-0-827208-16-2 (alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-827208-16-2
1. Advent 2. Worship programs
BV40 .D58 2000
263'.912 21

00009353

Printed in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

Christians celebrate Advent within a paradox. Advent is the beginning of the Christian story, the preparation, the hope that the birth of our Savior brings. And yet, unlike a work of fiction, we know the end of the story. We celebrate the beginning of the story with the end in mind.

We are preparing still for the coming of Christ, again and again. Jesus has already been born; he taught, lived, died, and rose from the dead. He comes again, and within each Advent we live in that expectation and hope, not only of the here and now, but of the second coming. We learn from the Advent scripture lessons how to live within that framework. The Advent readings “express not merely expectation of Christ’s nativity, which has already happened, but the coming of Christ to rule, to judge, and to save. The hope in which the church participates and the expectation we share are of the kingdom come.”¹

John Westerhoff reminds us that “it is difficult to wait in hope. Yet Advent provides us with a moment to reflect on where Christ is trying to break into our lives and into our world. It is time to ask, Are we watching, are we expecting, are we ready to see it? Do we really want it to come?”²

Advent is the time to focus on the “word of hope, the possibility of birthing new life, a rekindled vision to which we might give our lives. Advent focuses on the paradoxes of longing anticipation and patient watching; transforming the way we envision life and yet living prepared; living out a wait for what never seems to come and continuing in hopeful trust; desiring to give up control and opening ourselves to new possibilities for life.”³

In the Northern Hemisphere, Advent comes in the darkest time of the year; the Winter Solstice is in the middle of this season of the church year. Yet, for the church this is the season of light. We light a candle each Sunday to put out the darkness, to witness to the light to the nations. This light comes into the world and will never be put out. And each week the sanctuary is brighter. The darkness retreats as hope moves forward.

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Using Everlasting Light:

Advent is the beginning of the church year. It is a time of reflection, preparation, and penitence as we wait for the birth of our Savior. Advent is celebrated in many congregations by the lighting of a candle in the Advent wreath each Sunday. The liturgical colors for Advent are purple or blue and can be used in paraments, stoles, and altar cloths. The candles in the Advent wreath can be all blue, all purple, or three purple and one pink. There are differing traditions of lighting the pink candle on the third or fourth Sunday to represent Christ as the perfect rose, or on the third Sunday for joy.

Everlasting Light: a Resource for Advent Worship contains services encompassing Advent worship.

- The Hanging of the Greens traditionally occurs in many churches on the first Sunday of Advent. The service in this book may be used during the Sunday morning worship. More detailed instructions are in that section.
- For each Sunday in all three cycles of the Revised Common Lectionary, including the Sunday after Christmas, the book provides materials for the lighting of the Advent candles.
- The service begins with a Litany of Light, a brief meditation, and a unison prayer. In addition, this book includes a prayer for communion, offering, ideas for a children's sermon, and a benediction. These resources use as their basis the scriptures from the Revised Common Lectionary. The user will find these scriptures used in the Litany of Light, prayers, and benedictions.
- For the congregations who want to do an Advent candlelighting during the children's sermon, the book includes three years' selections. These are not based on the lectionary. When the Advent candlelighting is done during the children's moment, use other parts of each Sunday's worship resources in *Everlasting Light*, leaving out the meditation.
- The source of scripture listings in this volume is The Revised Common Lectionary, developed by the Consultation on Common Texts and published in 1992.

Introduction

“If the church is to be a gift to those whose lives cry out for good news, it will need to rethink how it integrates the stories of people with *its* story during the Advent season. This in turn will mean reflecting more deeply on the stories of Advent and more honestly on the stories of our lives.”⁴ John Westerhoff’s words summarize the purpose of *Everlasting Light*. By the repeated hearing of the Advent lections in the Litany of Light, the sermon, the children’s sermon, and the meditation for candlelighting, worshipers will find a connecting point between the scriptures and their own lives. The candlelighting meditations in *Everlasting Light* give each hearer a responsibility in responding to God’s initiative to bring God’s reign to bear on the created order.

From Isaiah’s words (60:19),

“but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory”

spoken in hope for the Hebrew people, to the fulfillment of which we sing each Christmas,

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight”⁵

we know that in spite of the darkness of the winter season and the darkness present in the world, the light shines. The weeks of Advent with the emphasis on preparation, waiting, and watching help us know that God’s light does shine in the darkness. The celebration of Christmas confirms the eternal light in God through Christ Jesus.

Let the light shine!

¹Hoyt Hickman et al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 52.

²John Westerhoff III, *A Pilgrim People: Learning Through the Church Year* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Seabury Press, 1984), p. 47.

³Westerhoff, p. 43.

⁴Westerhoff, p. 44.

⁵Words by Phillips Brooks (1868).

HANGING OF THE GREENS

Many congregations decorate the sanctuary for the Advent season in a service called Hanging of the Greens. The following service is intended to be used during morning worship on the first Sunday of Advent. Texts about the various customs, decorations, and symbols of the Advent season are included, woven in among the elements of worship. Although the hymnody of Advent does not normally include Christmas hymns, this Sunday is an exception. It is appropriate to use the carols of the Christmas season in connection with the specific decoration or symbol being put into place.

The service relies on the participation of the worshipers to bring the decorations forward, or to place them in the sanctuary. This Hanging of the Greens service is lengthy enough that a sermon may not be indicated, although a brief meditation could be used. Although this service uses a specific order of worship, adapt it for your own tradition and style of worship.

Include all the worship resources in *Everlasting Light* for the First Sunday in Advent in the places where they are suggested for this First Sunday.

Plan and organize the service so that it will flow smoothly. You will want to have the decorations in place or ready to be placed as the service indicates. Be sure the members of the congregation know they are to participate; choose ahead of time the volunteers to help coordinate the service. Adapt the service according to what symbols and decorations are particular to your congregation. You may want to use several narrators to vary the voices.

Hymn numbers are from *Chalice Hymnal*.

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Order of Worship¹

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP (*Use the Litany of Light from the First Sunday of Advent.*)

INVOCATION

NARRATION: The Decoration of the Sanctuary

During the Advent season, we prepare for the one who has come, whom we expect to come, and who will come again. In the Advent season, we recall God's entering history as one of us in his Son, Jesus Christ. We prepare our hearts so that God will find room and expression in our lives. As we proceed through Advent season, we pray for the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. During Advent we look toward Christmas—the fulfillment of God's love for all people.

Through many generations we have had reminders of Jesus' birth in the beautiful symbols of music, customs, and tradition so that we will not forget what our God has done. In the Hanging of the Greens, we share with Christians through the ages the memory and anticipation of Christ's coming. We festively decorate our church with the symbols of life, joy, and hope.

Jewish children at the Passover celebration ask, "Why do we do this? What does this mean?" The story of the angel of death passing over the homes of the Hebrews is retold so that the generations will not forget that mighty act of God. Christian children will ask, "Why do we do this? What does this mean?" We tell the story again and then proclaim, "God is with us. Jesus Christ is born."

OPENING HYMN: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (CH 119)

NARRATION: The Paraments

(During this narration, put the pulpit antependia, bookmark, and communion table runner in place.)

Hanging of the Greens

For many months, during the Pentecost season or Ordinary Time, the color used by the church in the paraments has been green. Green symbolizes growth—in the Christian life for each individual and each place where the church has witness.

During Advent, we change the paraments to purple—the color of royalty and of God’s reign—in preparation for the coming of the Christ. (*Alt.:* During Advent, we change the paraments to blue—the color of hope. We wait for the coming of the Christ in eternal hope.)

On Christmas Eve, we will change the color to white, representing joy and the purity of Jesus Christ.

HYMN: “All Earth Is Waiting” (CH 139)

NARRATION: The Banners

(At this time, hang the Advent banners.)

Banners have long been a tradition in the Christian community. They provide a colorful representation of many Christian symbols. By linking visible symbolism to the seasonal themes or specific scriptures, they help us worship. We not only hear the themes of worship but can see them symbolized before us on the banners.

In Advent the rich colors of purple and blue are used in addition to the familiar symbols of Christ’s coming. In preparation for worship, we are able to meditate upon the significance of this season as we are helped by these colorful additions to our sanctuary.

NARRATION: The Advent Wreath

(Place the Advent candles in the wreath at this time.)

The Advent wreath is a simple circle of evergreen branches. Because the branches come from outdoors during winter in the Northern Hemisphere, the evergreen testifies to the continuation of life. Bending the branches so that the ends touch to form a circle further symbolizes life without end.

Four candles encircle a central Christ candle. The candles signify God’s Son as the light of the world. There are four candles for the four weeks in Advent. Each Sunday in Advent, we light the candles from the preceding weeks, along with a new one.

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The Christ candle is not lit until Christmas Eve. The Advent wreath, with the increasing brightness from the candles, witnesses to the light that cannot be put out.

NARRATION: The Greens

(During the reading, congregational members will bring the garlands and boughs and decorate the sanctuary with them.)

Evergreens have long been considered symbols of eternity, a sign of God's everlasting nature, and an indication that the faithful will experience eternal life in communion with God in Jesus Christ.

The Advent custom of decorating with evergreen branches comes to us from the peasants of the Middle Ages, who believed that preparations should be made for the coming of Jesus. On the first Sunday of Advent, each family would gather evergreens and place them near the hearth in their home. We continue that tradition today as we hang the greens in our sanctuary, our church home.

As Isaiah 60:13 tells us: "The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary." The evergreens we use to decorate our sanctuary will remind us of God's abiding love in Jesus Christ and of our eternal relationship with God.

NARRATION: The Wreaths

(The wreaths are to be hung at this time.)

Christmas greens had their origin in pagan cultures. Their use was incorporated into Christian worship by those who saw in them a deeper, richer meaning for the church. Laurel and bay symbolize victory and triumph. Yew and cypress point to eternal life. Mistletoe symbolizes peace. The prickly leaves of holly are the symbol of the crown of thorns. The circle shape of the wreaths uses the Christian symbolism of eternal God, eternal love, without beginning or end.

HYMN: "People, Look East" (CH 142)

NARRATION: The Word

The Word of God as we read from our Bibles is a love story between God and humankind. The Bible is a *storybook*. God has

Hanging of the Greens

made a covenant with God's people. The covenant has been broken and then renewed over and over through history. God is Creator and Redeemer; God loves each one. In return, God expects us to love God, ourselves, and our neighbor.

The Bible is also a *book of faith*, giving us direction in life. The Bible is a *book of revelation*, unveiling relationships with God throughout time, that we might be witness to them. The Bible is a *book of vocation*, giving us a vision of how we are to live our lives in relationship with God and others.² This vision of how we are to live our lives comes to us as we listen to the Advent scriptures each week. It is clear we have a responsibility in fulfilling God's reign on earth.

THE READING OF THE WORD: Lessons for the First Sunday in Advent

GLORIA PATRI

THE CHILDREN'S SERMON (*Use this book's children's sermon starter from First Sunday for Year A, B, or C, as appropriate.*)

NARRATION: The Poinsettias

(Congregational members will bring the poinsettias to the chancel area at this time.)

The most popular flower of the Advent-Christmas season is the bright red poinsettia. This attractive flower was discovered growing wild in Mexico by Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, first American Ambassador there from 1825 to 1829. In Mexico, the plant was referred to as the "Flower of the Holy Night" or the "Flaming Leaf." Dr. Poinsett brought several of the plants to America, where they were developed into the type of flower we see today.

The poinsettia's symbolism is twofold. The star-shaped formation of red leaves reminds us of the star that shone on that first Christmas. The red flower reminds us of the blood of Jesus upon the cross, the Jesus who is our Savior.

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PRAYER HYMN: "From Heaven Above" (CH 146)

PASTORAL PRAYER AND PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

NARRATION: The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is a wonderful sign of God's love and faithfulness. Never losing its green color, the Christmas tree reminds us of God's steadfast love, which endures forever.

Legend has it that Martin Luther was the first person to decorate his home with a Christmas tree. Luther was walking home one Christmas Eve when he saw the glitter of stars shining through the snow-covered branches of the fir trees. Luther was so awed by the sight that he took one of the trees home with him and placed candles on the branches, to demonstrate to his family what a glorious sight he had seen.

From this first Christmas tree in the Luther household, the custom spread. Now Christmas trees are used in homes, in churches, and in communities, wherever the birth of Christ is celebrated and the love of Christ is shared.

NARRATION: The Chrismons

The use of Chrismons on the tree began in the Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Danville, Virginia. Chrismons, or "Christ's Monograms," are handmade designs forming the familiar symbols of the Christian faith.

These symbols speak to Christians of the deep meaning of the gospel. The fish is the most ancient symbol for our Lord and was used as an easily recognized secret sign by early Christians. The first letters of the Greek words for *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior* form the Greek word for *fish*.

The Anchor Cross was called the cross of hope by first-century Christians; it reminds us that Jesus is the hope of the world. The *Chi Rho* combines the first two letters of *Christ* in Greek. The *x*-shaped *chi* reminds us of the manger of Jesus. The *rho* is shaped like a shepherd's crook and reminds us of the first visitors to the manger.

The star, angels, lambs, and other Christian symbols are used for Chrismons; each of them helps us recall the Christmas story.

Hanging of the Greens

(During the singing of the hymn, people place the Chrismons on the tree.)

HYMN: “It Came upon the Midnight Clear” (CH 153)

NARRATION: The Crèche

Perhaps the most well known of all the Christmas traditions is the scene of Bethlehem, where the birth took place. Many people were in the town, having registered for the census. There a stable was filled with animals and the sounds of the night. Shepherds, angels, wise men, and townspeople came to find the Christ Child.

Let us set the scene of the birth to keep before us during the Advent season.

(Congregational members may put the different parts of the manger scene in place during the singing of the hymn.)

HYMN: “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (CH 144)

NARRATION: THE ADVENT CANDLES

During Advent, we prepare by lighting candles each week. As we see the darkness of the world and the darkness of the winter season, we are witness to the Word of God come into the world—the light for all people. The light comes into the world, shines in the darkness, and is never extinguished by the world. Christ is the light of the world.

These candles are a visible reminder of the light and hope that Advent brings to us each year.

THE LIGHTING OF THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE (See below under First Sunday for Year A, B, or C, as appropriate.)

UNISON PRAYER (See below under First Sunday for Year A, B, or C, as appropriate.)

HYMN: “One Candle Is Lit” (CH 128)

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING (At this time the congregation shares the offerings and celebrates the Lord’s supper.)

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CLOSING HYMN: “Come, O Long-expected Jesus” (*CH* 125)

BENEDICTION (*See below under First Sunday for Year A, B, or C, as appropriate.*)

¹Adapted from a service by the Rev. Dr. Judith E. Ridlen, pastor of Northside Christian Church, St. Louis, Missouri.

²John Westerhoff III, *A Pilgrim People: Learning Through the Church Year* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Seabury Press, 1984), pp. 4–5.