

Third Sunday of Advent

Year A, 2025

Is 35a:1-6a, 10 Jas 5:7-10
Ps 146 Mt 11:2-11

Advent candles: a reflection on John the Baptist, light, and bearing fruit

Someone asked me the other day about the symbolism of each of the four candles on the Advent wreath, whether there was an official meaning for each candle and whether there was an official order of lighting the candles. I think it was a surprise when I answered “no” to both questions. There is neither an official meaning for the candles nor an official order of lighting them.

Here’s why. The Advent wreath originated as a domestic devotion and not an element of the liturgy. It comes not from the Church’s official liturgy, the order of worship, but from the private devotion of the Catholic faithful. Advent wreaths came into being in Catholic homes as a way for families to prayerfully mark the passages of the weeks of Advent in anticipation of Christmas.

Think back to the days before electricity. In the evenings, candles had to be lit to provide light. And so, a practical necessity opened the way to a decorative touch – a wreath, a bit of ribbon, a dash of color – which in turn inspired devotion. As the Sundays of Advent advanced, the light from the wreath grew stronger with the lighting of each additional candle, pointing to the birth of Christ, “the true light ... [who] was coming into the world” (Jn 1:9).

Later, the Advent wreath was adopted as a nice way to decorate churches during the Advent season. But the liturgy neither prescribes nor recommends (nor forbids) the presence of an Advent wreath. So there are no official statements about what each candle represents and no official order of lighting the candles.

However, one candle is designated for the third Sunday of Advent, called *Gaudete* Sunday. That candle is often rose-colored, though it does not have to be. The rose color of Gaudete Sunday is symbolic of rejoicing. So if there is a rose-colored candle, that one is reserved for the third Sunday. But the other candles can be lit in any order.

In those days before electricity, when candlelight was necessary, we can imagine a Catholic family lighting the Advent wreath just before their evening meal, mom helping one of the little ones to light the candles, explaining what Advent is and how it leads us to the joy of Christmas, dad leading the family in grace. Afterward everyone together reading or playing or doing some quiet chores before bedtime in the light of the candles, maybe with some time for family singing of carols or hymns. Without television and radio, people had to fill their hours with something, and often it was with such pleasant and truly human things, time well spent together in wholesome activities.

We can get that back, you know, that nearness to each other, that nearness to God. Just turn off the devices, turn the lights way down, light a few candles, and go! Fill those dark and quiet hours

with human interaction, with authentic family time together. Maybe it's time to bring the spirit of the Advent wreath back into our homes, and not just during the four weeks of Advent. The Advent wreath and candles, arising from the domestic church, is pure spiritual genius. Its light scatters the darkness of fear, isolation, and doubt and points us to something better, something greater, to the One who is coming into the world.

With this in mind, we can see that the Advent candles can also symbolize John the Baptist, who points out and points to the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29; 36). As their wax is consumed, the candles decrease, and as they decrease, their light increases. Surely we remember John's great witness to Jesus after he baptized him in the Jordan (Jn 3:25ff). Jesus then started baptizing, too, and everyone was going to Jesus instead of to John. John's disciples, a little perplexed, went to John and asked:

"Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him." John answered and said, ... "You yourselves can testify that I said that I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him... the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:26, 28-30.)

What does it mean, then, for me to decrease and for him to increase? It means that I must be like an Advent candle. I am the

wax; Christ is the light. As the flame – with its warmth and light – is drawn out of the wax, so must Christ be drawn out of me.

But here's the difference, the wax cannot resist the flame, but I can resist Christ. I can say all it day long, and even mean it, that I want him to increase, while at the same time I refuse to decrease. Poor little candle that I am, I think to hold on to my life by not letting the flame consume me, but in truth I am losing everything. *Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it* (Lk 17:33; and Mt 10:39; Mt 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25).

An unlit candle cannot serve its purpose, which is to give light. An unlit candle bears no fruit, offers no warmth. An unlit candle is a mere decoration, a trifle, a bauble, a collector of dust. How many, I ask you, decorative (and dusty) candles do you have in your homes? Psalm 30:10 asks: *"Does dust give you thanks or declare your faithfulness?"* I think we know the answer. Soon enough such candles, unused, are discarded, rejected. Poor things, they never lived. To live, a candle must be consumed. Only then is it truly alive. Only then can it serve its purpose, find its fulfillment. As its wax decreases, its light increases. The truly successful candle is one that at last disappears, having been completely transformed into light. The unburnt candle is a failure, to be pitied, and ultimately tossed away. It did not serve its purpose. It did not perform its role.

A candle that gives no light will have the same reward as the tree that bears no fruit. Who in the gospels first spoke about trees

bearing fruit? It was John the Baptist and we heard this in last Sunday's gospel (Mt 3:10-11):

Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John is the messenger who prepares the way before the Lord, who, only a few chapters later, says the same thing as John (Mt 7:18-20):

Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. So by their fruits you will know them.

In some ways, then, mixing our biblical metaphors, we can say that light is the fruit that the candle bears, and like fruit, light is consumed, used, and passes on. As fruit is eaten and gives life, so it is the same for the light that we are meant to give in the world, your light that "must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (Mt 5:16).

Light and fruit, both of these represent the good deeds that glorify the heavenly Father. So getting back to a question that I asked earlier, what does this mean for me, that I must decrease and he must increase? It means, like an Advent candle, I must give light, or in other words, bear fruit, and so glorify the Father by my good deeds.

Today's readings, if you pay attention to them, tell us how to be light, how to give light, what we can and must do, so that we may

be consumed and Christ be drawn out of us. To give concrete evidence of my love for God and neighbor, I must imitate Jesus, who is my master and my teacher, who, sets the example for me to follow. So...

From Isaiah: I must strengthen feeble hands and firm up weak knees; I must encourage those in fear.

From the Psalm: I must secure justice for the oppressed; give food to the hungry; set captives free; give sight to the blind; raise up those who are bowed down; love the just; protect the stranger; sustain the fatherless and the widow.

From the second reading, the letter of James: when in hardship, I must be patient; be firm of heart; and not complain.

From the gospel: I must work to restore sight; to give back mobility; to rehabilitate the outcast; to restore hearing; to raise the dead; to proclaim the good news to the poor.

Quite a list, whether taken literally or metaphorically. Either way, these are the things we are to do. This is what it means to give light. These are the works of light, expressed directly in the holy scriptures themselves, there for all who have eyes to see, ears to hear, a mind to understand, a heart to desire it.

And, my little candles, doing these things will consume you, like the flame consumes the wax, like zeal for his Father's house consumed Jesus (Jn 2:17). But being so consumed, until there is nothing left of you but light, you will have finally achieved "the

goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pt 1:9), and with St Paul you will be at last able to say “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

There is no reason to look elsewhere or to another or for another explanation. It is all here, in a simple Advent wreath, a thing that even the least in the kingdom of heaven can understand. So now, little candles, do not fear, do not be afraid. Rather, catch flame and be consumed! Let your wax be turned into light, and “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy” (1 Pt 1:8) that the “Father of lights” (Jas 1:17) has called you be to light even as Christ your Lord is light. Amen.