

Celebrating Advent in 2020

Local churches will have many different Advent routines and traditions. As it becomes increasingly likely that much, if not all of the season of Advent will be experienced in Lockdown, recreating and maintaining those traditions are likely to be important. NWBA has regularly offered resources for Advent, and this year will be no exception. This outline has been put together to offer to those who might access them an outline framework for how they have been put together. There is absolutely no need to be bound by this, but it may be helpful to your own planning to at least be aware of how the NWBA resources have been structured.

The Candles of Advent

We light candles in advent as a sign of expectation amidst reality. The fragile flame of a candle represents for us that we, as yet, have only glimpses of the hope that is to come. Yet this tiny flame is able to dispel darkness – darkness does not exist – it is simply the absence of light. You cannot switch on the darkness – you can only switch off the light! For all its fragility, a candle flame is able to pierce the darkness and hold our attention in its midst.

The candles are set in a circle of evergreen – representing for us the love of God – unending and unchanging. We are held and founded in the love of God.

Advent candles are a relatively new innovation – the first Advent wreath is believed to have appeared in the mid 19th century, when a Lutheran minister, working with children made one from the wheel of a cart. In our Baptist tradition it is only in recent decades that they have been commonly used. There are therefore a variety of traditions and ideas that are attached to the various Advent candles. Over the years, we have developed readings and resources around the framework that follows:

Week 1 – The candle of Hope – hearing hope in the narratives of history.

Hope is something that echoes through our history, so it is not surprising that we attach to the candle of hope, the “stories of our ancestors”. We can trace the story of God’s salvation into some of the earliest narratives of the Old Testament, and see them echoed again in the early chapters of the New. We can also pause to remember stories of the Early believers and stories from our own local histories of God’s faithfulness. As we remember God’s faithfulness in the past, and as we hear God’s promises echoing from history and fulfilled on our Gospel narratives – so our hope for the future is rekindled.

Week 2 – the candle of love – hearing love in the messages of prophets.

We often use the second week of Advent to particularly hear again the messages of the prophets – those who spoke of hope and restoration in the midst of exile. When everything else is stripped away, God’s love remains – even in the midst of human circumstances of despair, God’s message of love prevails. Even those prophets who spoke out in the years before exile, were expressions of God’s love – pleading with his beloved people to turn again to embrace the love that was theirs to

find. And so this candle serves as a sign of hope to us – that whatever our own circumstances, God’s love will outlast them all, and that we are called to love God and to share God’s love within them.

Week 3 – the candle of peace – finding peace through trusting God in difficult and unexpected experiences.

We often accompany the candle of peace with the emergence of John the Baptist inviting us to “prepare the way of the Lord”. This is a call to action, to not simply rest in passive expectation of the coming of God’s Kingdom, but to seek its ways and by agents of its message. As we light this candle, we are invited to identify ourselves as heralds of God’s Kingdom, to display through our actions, our attitudes and our activities, our expectation of its coming. To work for peace by challenging the narratives of division and power – to bring peace by reminding those who feel abandoned and oppressed that God’s Kingdom will one day come.

Week 4 – the candle of Joy – rejoicing in God’s sustained presence, even when things are not easy.

On this final Sunday before Christmas, our mood becomes one of celebration. This is a week when we are likely to remember and re-tell the narratives of the coming of Christ. It is for this reason it is sometimes called “Mary’s Candle” – allowing one who was so central to them – to draw us again into those stories that remind us that God is with us. Joy has depth, and this is no mere call to frivolity and fun (though they can both be an expression of it) but for those for whom this will be a season of struggle – to find again those deeper threads of joy that can prevail even within their struggle. The story we share and celebrate is a story that is our gateway to eternity.