

THE HANGING OF THE GREENS

An Explanation of our Church Christmas Decorations

Our Savior Lutheran Church and School
Lansing, MI
Advent 2016

For Christmas, we enjoy decorating our homes with lights, wreaths, nativity scenes, a Christmas tree and other decorations which bring to life the wonderful message of the birth of the Savior. Our church family also enjoys making the sanctuary ready for the birth of Jesus. You will find in this handout a scripture reading and an explanation of the symbolism of several decorations. We encourage you to use these in your personal and family devotions or in your gatherings during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

The Advent Wreath

Scripture Reading – Isaiah 9:2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

Symbolism of the Advent Wreath

Our Advent Wreath was hand made by members of our congregation. As we light each candle, it reminds us that the time of the coming of Christ draws ever nearer. God has promised us a Savior and the ever-increasing light of the wreath reminds us of the anticipated arrival of the Light that will shine in the darkness of our sin-filled world.

Originating in eastern Germany, the Advent Wreath as we know it came to the United States in 1947. The four candles are named to bring us the message of Advent—hope, peace, joy and love. The pink candle is lit on the third week, making the half way point through Advent. The circle of the wreath, often covered in evergreen, reminds us of God’s never-ending love for us and that the fullness of His glory is before us in eternity when the Christ who was to come will come again.

The Poinsettia

Scripture Reading – Isaiah 40:6-8

A voice says, “Cry out.”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”

Symbolism of the Poinsettia

Originally from Mexico, the plant is native to the American continent, as is the tradition. Introduced by, and named after, Dr. Joel Robert Poinset, an American Ambassador who was in Mexico in 1828, the flower has been cultured and cultivated in many varieties. Those of Central America refer to this flower as the “flower of the holy night”.

It blooms at Christmas time with a bright red flower for the blood of Christ. The flower is star-shaped with radiant white petals for the purity of Christ and gold-star centers for the royalty of Christ.

The Wreaths and the Garland

Scripture Reading – Isaiah 60:13-14

The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn the place of My sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of My feet. The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Symbolism of the Wreaths and the Garland

The Wreaths

In the midst of the browns and grays of winter the green color comes as a reminder to us of the freshness and hope of life we have. Life continues for the evergreens and so does our life continue in Christ Jesus.

The wreath, a circle of evergreens, reminds us of the never-ending love of God and the eternal glories He holds before us.

The Garland

A roping made of evergreens, with its greens of fir and pine, were signs to the people of God's dwelling in their midst.

They were often mixed with holly and ivy which also maintains the green color. Holly was associated with the burning bush and the red berries represent the blood drops from the cruel thorns of Jesus' crown.

The Nativity

Scripture Reading – Luke 2:8-12

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Symbolism of the Nativity

Our Nativity Scene is located in our church entry way in a large glass case. In nativity scenes we remember Jesus, who has come into the world for us. We remember Mary and Joseph coming to Bethlehem and her delivering our Savior into the world in a cattle stall because there was no room for them in the Inn. The baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

The humble beginning of Jesus remind us of His giving up the wealth of heaven to come to the poverty of this world. We also remember that the good news of the birth of the Savior was first announced, not to royalty or to the wealthy, but to humble shepherds in the fields outside Jerusalem.

We, too, come to worship the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We lay before Him our gifts of thanks and praise as our display of love.

Today this scene generates great feelings of gratitude for our Savior's birth. We display our nativity scenes as a witness to the world that Christ, the Savior, is born.

The Trees

Scripture Reading – Jeremiah 17:7-8

But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Symbolism of the Tree

Trees have been important parts of mankind's history. We think of the tree in the garden and its role in the fall of mankind. We think of the tree of the cross on which our Savior gave His life for our redemption.

An evergreen tree is a reminder that God comes to us and is ever-living. Trees were first used in German paradise plays portraying the creation of mankind. They were later decorated in the woods as part of the Christmas celebration, eventually being brought into homes.

Martin Luther is credited with being the first to put candles on trees. These "lights" symbolized the beauty of the sky and stars. He had seen the light of the sky reflecting off the snow-covered tree and wanted his wife and children to share in the experience. Gilded nuts, paper flowers and other decorations were later added.

Today, electric lights replace the candles. Decorations, both homemade and store-bought, remind us of the beauty of God's creation shared with us anew each day.

Our church has three trees behind the altar, one for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as indicated by the Chrismon at the top of each tree.

The Chrismons

Scripture Reading – Revelation 22:12-14, 17

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. The Spirit and the bride say, Come! And let him who hears say, Come! Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."

Symbolism of the Chrismons

On our tree are a number of different decorations called chrismons. These are handmade by ladies of our congregation. The word "Chrismon" comes from combining the words **Christ** and **Monogram**. Each of the symbols used leads us to Christ Himself:

The **Alpha and Omega** remind us that Jesus is the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

The **anchor** reminds us that Jesus is our anchor, a sign of hope, sure and steadfast.

The **Chi Rho** are the first two letters of the Greek name of Christ (X and P)

The **circle** represents eternal life with no discernible beginning or end. The **triangle** is for the Trinity.

The **butterfly** exemplifies Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the new life we have in Him.

The **cross with Iota, Eta and Sigma**, the Greek letters on the cross, reminds us of Jesus who died for us.

The **fish** is from the acrostic **IXTHUS: Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior**.

The **orb and cross** remind us of the world's need for Christ, and is an object held by an imperial ruler.

The **shepherd's crook** points us to Jesus the Good Shepherd.

The **shell** is a representation of Baptism, which unites us with Christ and washes our sins away.

As we consider the rich meaning and symbolism behind the decorations that beautify our church during Advent and Christmas, we realize how we can use the arts to glorify God. Gifts of God's good creation are arranged and presented to point people to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. We appreciate the art, decorations, not to mention the music that creates a beautiful picture of God's saving love. We thank God for the gift of the arts and for the artisans that God has blessed with these talents.

We also consider the decorations we have in our own homes, and how they testify to our faith in our Savior, Jesus. We most likely have a tree, wreath, even an Advent wreath in our home, and probably a nativity scene, too. These also have rich meaning and symbolism. We want to be constantly mindful of this, so that we don't simply go through the motions of setting the decorations out and putting them away each year without giving thought to their significance. When we take the time to reflect on their meaning how they connect to our own faith, they enrich our celebration of Christmas to a heavenly degree.

These decorations can also be useful witness tools, even as they speak to us. Christmas is a time when we often have family and friends over, perhaps even neighbors and coworkers. As we share our customs and traditions with them, these decorations give us the opportunity to share the hope, peace, joy and love that we have in Christ our Savior, whose birth we celebrate.

May God fill your home and your heart with that hope, peace, joy, and love this Christmas and always.

To read the TRUE Christmas story from the Holy Bible, look up **Matthew 1:18-12** and **Luke 2:1-20**.



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