

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Deborah Phillips
at Grace Church in Salem*

Advent 1 Year C

The Greening of the Church

This morning, we are blessing the greens that remind us of this new season of Advent.
This morning, I would like to stop and consider the meanings of these decorations.

Consider the branches.

There is another time of the Church year when we use branches - Palm Sunday.

On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, the great city of Israel.

The crowds are calling him the "King of kings and Lord of lords."

The branches recognize his royalty, his kingship.

Although riding on a donkey, wearing common attire, Jesus on that day was recognized as the King of love.

The branches of Advent have a similar theme.

During Advent, we prepare for the entrance of Jesus into the holy city of our hearts.

We call him the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The purple majesty of the hangings recognizes his royalty, his kingship.

Although Jesus was carried to Bethlehem on a donkey, and born in a stable, Jesus, on this day is recognized as the King of love.

The branches of Advent remind us that we still wait for the coming of Christ

We watch and wait for the coming of our King.

Consider the wreaths.

God's nature is one where there is no beginning, no end.

"He is Alpha and Omega" as the Christmas hymn goes.

Christ always has been and always will be.

There is great comfort in this.

God, not just taking human form, but human nature, came to let us know just how much love there was to God.

God took our human nature into heaven after the Resurrection, transforming God's realm as well.

God will come yet again, completing the circle of love.

Christ will come again and unite all of heaven and earth, transforming it into the new creation.

With God, there is no beginning or end to the cosmic love.

It has always and will always be present, in spite of us.

Now, consider the Jesse tree.

Thousands of years ago, God promised the people who believed in him that he would bring them to the promised land, first here on earth, later, to his realm.

A sign of this promise was the root of Jesse, the Jesse tree.

After thousands of years the promises were fulfilled.
God's people reached the promised land.
Then, there was the promise of the Messiah.
This too was fulfilled so that the process of complete restoration to God could begin.
And so, our children make ornaments of these promises and put them on the tree.
And we remember to fulfill our promises made at our Baptism and every day of our lives.
The blessing of God's faithfulness is present in the tree.

Lastly, let us consider the Advent wreath.
This wreath offers us the Advent light.
"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."
We are those people.
The season of Advent shines God's light on the path to God's glory.
This season offers us the illumine way of the cross and then everlasting life.
Our collect this morning calls us to put on the armor of light.

The Advent wreath sheds light on those dark places of the world, on those dark places of our hearts.
It calls us out of the darkness of this temporal life, and into life immortal.

Although the early Israelites waited thousands of years for the birth of the Messiah, they did wait.
They passed down the stories, the promises during the hardship of slavery and during the duress of the exile in the desert.
They kept alive the eternal hope of the light of the world to come, of the coming of Jesus.

It is 2000 years later and we are preparing for Christ's final arrival.
Although the world seems difficult at times, we too hold out the hope, as those early people of God in the Middle East did.
We too must pass down the stories of God's promises fulfilled and promises to come.

We must live each day, not as if it is our last, but as if the King is coming that day.
How will we prepare for this new creation?
How will we welcome the Christ this time, when he does arrive, not in a lowly manger, but in his glorious majesty?
Will we be ready?

Be alert to the signs, be ready, warns Jesus in our Gospel today.
This new year of Advent is a time to remember Jesus' first arrival, so that we may prepare for his final coming.
The first time, he was gathered into the kingdom of God.
This next time, we will be too.
We know this is true, for God has promised it.
We know this to be true, for the circle to be completed.
We know this to be true, for we have been promised eternal life.
We have the light, leading us on the way, a way made straight, a way prepared for us.

Keep awake, we are called, and tell the stories of God's promises and be faithful in keeping your own.
Watch, Jesus says, read the signs of hope and point them out to others.
Wait for the light to illumine the path, and then boldly walk toward the King of love.

Let us pray:

Grant, Lord, that our lives may be a sign of faith in a world grown cold with disbelief, a symbol of hope in a time of gloom and despair, and a flaming image of love in a winter of discontent. May we be patient as we watch and wait, as we travel down the road toward our final fulfillment. Amen.