

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS AT CRAWFORD

These are the readings from the Blessing of the Greens service. The information was compiled from many sources and written and rewritten by me many times, over almost 30 years, adapted for each church I have served.

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The Advent Wreath

Advent is a time of expectation, and this is symbolized not only by the four-week period of preparation, but also by the lighting of an Advent candle on each Sunday of the season. The flame of each new candle reminds us that something is happening, but something more is still to come. The Advent season will not be complete until all four candles are lighted, with the central Christ candle also burning brightly on Christmas Eve.

The tradition of the Advent wreath is traced back to an old Scandinavian custom that celebrated the coming of light after a season of darkness. In that day, candles were placed on the edge of a horizontal wheel. As the wheel was spun around, the lighted candles would blend into a continuous circle of light. Today we use a circle of evergreen to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows no beginning nor ending.

There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles in the Advent wreath. The three purple candles today symbolize the coming of Christ from the royal line of David. But the color was originally taken from Lent. Until the fifth century, Lent was the only liturgical season celebrated in the church. Purple is the liturgical color for Lent, because when Jesus was mocked before his crucifixion, he was dressed in a purple robe, a symbol of royalty, with the crown of thorns placed on his head.

At the end of the fifth century, the church added Advent as sort of a bookend for Lent—a time of reflection and penance before Christmas. So they used purple candles. Midway through Lent, the lectionary allows for a moment of joy, and traditionally the Pope gave citizens a pink rose on that day.

Since Advent was modeled after Lent, the third week is also focused on joy and instead of a pink rose, we get a pink candle. Each of the candles represents a gift brought to us by the Christ Child: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The white candle in the center represents Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve.

This is the second week of Advent so today we keep the light of hope and added the light of peace this morning, remembering Paul's words in Colossians 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."



Greens and Wreaths

Greenery is used extensively in our homes at this holiday time to give them a festive look. This is no modern idea. Ancient peoples cut branches from evergreen trees, carried them to their temples, and worshiped them for maintaining life throughout the long winter. In King Solomon's time, greens were used in all the sacred rites of the religious festivals.



Many years before the birth of Christ, the peoples of Europe hung evergreens above their doors during the winter, for they believed that the woodland spirits wandered about in the cold. They hoped that by offering them shelter within their homes, they would receive good fortune and health.

The ancient Romans used greens during their festival of Saturnalia held in late December, and early Christians adopted the use of greens for the celebration of Christmas. Just as this particular species of tree is always green, so our hope for eternity is always secure because it is based on Christ. Green is the color for life and growth.

The use of a wreath is traced to the ancient importance of the circle. The circle for millennia has represented the divine manifestation, perfect and entire, including everything and wanting nothing, without beginning or end, neither first nor last, timeless and absolute. It has always been a symbol of the higher planes of existence.

One bit of greenery stands out at Christmas and that is the holly. If you've ever worked with it, you know that its leaves are very sharp and remain green and strong while other leaves wither. The holly was sacred to the Druids who hung it on windows and doorways to fend off evil spirits. For them it was a symbol of fertility and eternal life. They believed that if you cut down a holly tree, it would bring bad luck, but if you hung it in your home, it would bring good luck and protection and even prevent lightning strikes.

The Romans associated the holly with Saturn, the god of agriculture, wealth, and liberation, and hung its boughs during the festival of Saturnalia. As Christians gradually re-interpreted the gift-giving festival of Saturnalia into Christmas, they kept what traditions they could, including the holly, which would please not only the Romans, but the Druids, and Celts as well.

Christians came to see the sharp holly as symbolic of the crown of thorns placed on Jesus when he was mocked and the bright red berries as a symbol of his blood. The greens and wreaths all speak to us of the everlasting and sacrificial love of God.

Poinsettias

The most popular flower of the Advent-Christmas season is the bright red poinsettia. First introduced to the United States in 1828 by Dr. Joel Robert Poinsett—our first foreign minister to Mexico—this brilliant tropical plant is called by the people of Mexico and Central America the Flower of the Holy Night.

A charming Mexican legend explains its origin. Having finished running his daily errands, an orphan boy named Pedro sadly counted his centavos. There were hardly enough of them to buy his evening meal. "Come with us to the cathedral," urged his friends. "No," answered Pedro, "I have no money to buy a gift."

"Take this," suggested one of his practical friends, pointing to a weed by the side of the road. Hesitantly Pedro picked the stringy weed, climbed the steep hill to the church, and slowly made his way to the altar with its Mexican manger scene. Kneeling, he reverently laid his gift in front of the figure of the Christ Child. He soon became aware of the murmuring crowd. In wide-eyed amazement, he saw a dazzling and beautiful scarlet flower where only dried leaves had existed a moment before. His humble offering had been miraculously transformed.

The poinsettia has also been used to symbolize the more tragic side of Jesus' coming. It reminds



us of the blood of the male infants killed by Roman soldiers as King Herod sought to find the child that would threaten his throne. It also symbolizes the blood that Jesus would shed on the Cross.

While we don't have poinsettias here tonight, we will have them on Christmas Sunday and through Christmas Eve.



The Christmas Tree and Lights

In the pagan days of early Europe, trees were seen as hiding places for spirits, whom they worshiped as gods. They held ceremonies in their honor, placed gifts beneath their branches including, sometimes, a human sacrifice. The transition of the tree from a pagan to a Christian symbol is based upon legend about St. Boniface (sometimes called St. Winfred) and you can find a statue of him in the German town of Altenberg to this day.

According to the story, St. Boniface was working among the Hessians as a missionary and was determined to destroy a large oak tree in the town of Geismar, which was the site of a child sacrifice to the god Thor each winter. The Hessians boasted that the God of Boniface could not destroy the Thunder Oak of Thor.

On the day of the sacrifice, Boniface came with several other missionaries and an axe. Just as the youth was to be killed, the missionary interrupted the ceremony and chopped down the Thunder Oak. The majestic tree fell to the ground with a thunderous roar, revealing for the first time a young fir tree growing between the broken branches of the fallen oak. The people were awed and amazed at the young tree inside the old one.

Facing the group, St. Boniface said, "This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of fir. It is the sign of endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ Child; gather about it, not in the wild woods but in your homes. There it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness."

While our indoor tree is meant to represent a living fir tree, our outdoor living tree is not, and it doesn't exactly point straight to heaven. But it has its own special qualities. I've asked our long-time members and no one remembers who planted the holly tree next to the front of the church or when. Maybe it sprang up from a bluebird dropping a berry from a neighbor's tree that found fertile soil here. But somehow it took root and grew without anyone paying it any attention or giving it care.

Years ago, as a number of diseased trees were being removed from the property, the ragged holly tree beside the front of the church was also marked for removal as a nuisance. But Colin Simson decided not to chop it down after all, and so there it sat, continuing to grow a foot or so each year. Did the Lord stay his hand, knowing that almost a decade later, when it had grown to 26 ft., a pandemic would kick us out of the building and force us to look for something to serve us as a Christmas tree as we needed last year?

What could be more perfect for the times in which we now live than a giant tree of sharp holly, the tree with leaves too strong to lose their vibrant green, a symbol of endurance and everlasting life that also draws blood and reminds us of Christ's suffering. With the star of Bethlehem on top, lovingly crafted by Frank Leathers, this tree brings the life of Jesus full circle—from birth to death to everlasting life. A Christmas tree of living holly brings us the hope that our wounding can be turned to strength, and that the blood of lives given for others bears fruit of unmatched beauty in the frozen hardships of life.

So, Boniface, I'll see your fir tree and raise you a holly. And then we'll join with those early

Germans who Boniface baptized and who then brought the trees into their homes and decorated them with lighted candles. Other decorations began to be added in Germany in 1605 and Queen Victoria brought the tree-trimming idea to England in 1841, still putting lighted candles in the branches along with other decorations, many designed to reflect that light.

Lit candles on trees inside houses were an obvious fire hazard, but it wasn't until 1882 that a man named Edward Hibbard Johnson was able to solve the problem. It began when Johnson hired a bright 24-year-old named Thomas Edison as a consultant for the Automatic Telegraph Company. When Edison left to form his own company, Johnson decided to follow him and handle Edison's business and marketing. After Edison patented the light bulb in 1880, Johnson joined him and some other investors to form the Edison Lamp Company to sell the bulbs.

By the 1870's, Queen Victoria's decked out Christmas tree idea had jumped to the United States and fresh-cut fir trees were being put in homes, store windows, and even the White House. Predictably, fires ensued. Johnson saw a marketing opportunity for their new product. He put up a Christmas tree in his own parlor near a window facing the street. He hand-wired 80 red, white, and blue light bulbs and strung them around the tree, put it on a revolving pedestal, and powered it with a generator. Then he called a reporter. The rest, as they say is history.

The very first strings of 16 lights, which were vaguely flame-shaped and sat in brass sockets the size of shot glasses, sold for \$12 in 1900. That would be the equivalent of \$350 in today's dollars. But by the 1930's the price of bulbs and availability of electricity was such that the colored lights were everywhere, moving from the Christmas tree itself out onto bushes and homes and anywhere else you could string them and plug them in. Today they consume 6% of the nation's electrical load each December.

Are the lights around the tree and strung into the bushes a symbol of Christian faith? It's all in how we view them. Just like St. Boniface thought quickly on his feet and re-interpreted the meaning of a fir tree; so, we can view the lights that surround us here as symbols of the light of Christ, in a diversity of colors, shapes, and sizes; hope shining out from our church to a struggling world.

Candles In The Windows

The Christian use of candles, symbolic of Christ as the "Light of the World" is said to be a combination of Roman and Hebrew customs. At first, tallow candles were used for church services because of the high cost of wax tapers. When the latter became cheaper, they were preferred as an emblem of Mary's purity, for wax is the product of virgin bees.

Many persons believed that bees had come directly from heaven and usually religious institutions kept swarms of them. A 13th-century liturgical writer named Durandus offered that wax represented Christ's body; the wick, His soul; and the flame, His divine nature.

We've already seen that it was a very early German practice to put tapers on Christmas trees, and the 17th century reformer Martin Luther is credited with making that tradition more popular. Ireland never adopted the Christmas tree as a national tradition. It did, however, originate the popular custom of placing candles in the window on Christmas Eve.

It all began when the English attempted to suppress the religious beliefs of the Irish. This forced priests to conceal their identities and conduct religious services in homes and farmhouses at night. Thus, at Christmas time, a family, hoping that Mass would be said under their roof, would place a lighted candle in their window as a welcome to priests in the area.



When English soldiers inquired about the candles, they were told that should Mary and Joseph come that way looking for shelter, the candle would be their invitation to enter and be welcome. The custom was permitted as merely superstition and brought to America by Irish Catholic immigrants. So as the candles shine from our windows here at Crawford, Mary and Joseph are certainly welcome, but so are anyone and everyone else looking for a safe haven in the dark.



The Nativity

Many children get a vivid impression of the circumstances under which Christ was born from miniature, or larger nativity scenes. These show the Baby Jesus in the manger, watched over by Mary and Joseph, while nearby, in worship, are the shepherds and the Wise Men. Many, many children participate in creating a live version of this in some form of a Christmas pageant or as a full-blown live nativity outdoors with animals. But rare is the church that does not have some kind of creche, indoors or outdoors, to display the scene at Christmas. We have them both indoors and outdoors.

The custom is said to have originated in the church, perhaps as early as the eighth century. However, it was St. Francis of Assisi who made it popular as part of the Christmas observance, when he set up a simple manger scene at the little town of Greccio, Italy in 1224.

During the Middle Ages there were only a few books. Even if there had been more, most of the people could not have read them. The church ceremonies were conducted in Latin at that time, so holidays like Christmas and Easter, held perhaps little meaning for many church attendants. This worried St. Francis, who wanted to show his followers that Christ also came from humble beginnings.

It's said that just three years before his death, St. Francis saw some shepherds sleeping in the fields near Greccio; and this gave him the inspiration for celebrating the coming of the Savior in a way all could understand. Soon he had made his plans for setting up a nativity scene saying, "I would like to make a memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, and in some way behold with my bodily eyes his infant hardships; how he lay in the manger on the hay with the ox and ass standing by."

Before Christmas came, the news spread rapidly through the town and countryside. Crowds of worshipers, many with torches and carrying presents for the Holy Babe, came to see this unusual way of teaching the sacred story. Tradition tells us this took place in a cave on the hill above Greccio, not far from Assisi.

Here the noblemen had assembled the necessary properties, including the manger, straw, and a live ox and ass. Real persons took the parts of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. St. Francis himself arranged the scene, and placed a life-sized figure of the Christ Child in the manger. There were shouts of joy from the peasants when they saw the nativity group, and it is written "the night was lit up; with many bright lights, and with cheerful hymns of praise." For the first time, many understood the true meaning of that event in the stable at Bethlehem.