

INTRODUCTION

Every year we prepare for Christmas with decorations, *lots* of decorations, including candles and electric lights. This four-part sermon series we started last Wednesday is about common decorations used for Advent and Christmas and how they help prepare us for the coming of Christ. If we look in the right places, we can see Christ in the holiday trimmings and adornments. This morning, we take a look at how *lights* help us prepare for the coming of Christ.

We see sparkling lights everywhere during this season. Some strings of lights cover the spectrum of colors; others are clear white. We decorate our homes with lights -inside and out. Some towns, like Glencoe, even have competitions to see which household can put on the best exterior light display. Communities string lights on their streets and poles. Businesses and shopping malls decorate buildings with dazzling displays of holiday lights. Communities host nighttime parades with illuminated floats and characters. Last night there was the big Arli-Dazzle parade in Arlington. I love how down there they label it: “**Probably THE** Largest Lighted Christmas Parade in Minnesota”!

Back up here in good-old “G-Town” in our church sanctuary, we have our own light display for the season. In the Chancel, we have the Advent wreath, which holds four candles that we progressively light as we approach Christmas. Our Chancel Christmas tree has been wrapped with strings of crystal-clear lights that shine like a galaxy of stars. Then there’s the church balcony which has greenery with built-in lights for us to enjoy (when we remember to plug it in!). What’s more we have several lighted Christmas trees on display in both the Church and school buildings.

Why do we decorate with lights this time of the year? Is it only for sentimental value? Or is there a deeper significance? To answer these questions, let’s consider when lights were first used for Advent and Christmas and what their *original* meaning and purpose were.

I. The tradition of holiday lights originated in Europe and was brought to America.

Last Wednesday, we learned that the use of Christmas trees began in Germany in the Middle Ages. The practice of attaching candles to Christmas trees began in the 1500s. In fact, tradition says Martin Luther was the first to do this.

This practice caught on, and as it became more common, candles were attached to the tree branches by pins, then by holders, then by lanterns. These lights reminded Christians of the lights that accompanied Christ’s birth, including the Bethlehem star and the angels who lit up the night sky with the glory of God. They reminded people that Christ is the light of the world.

Eventually, German immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought their Tannenbaum tradition to America. Over time, the practice of decorating evergreen trees with lights was adopted by other ethnic communities in the United States.

Of course, Americans are known for innovation, and that includes the development of Christmas lights. After the invention of the electric light bulb by Thomas Edison in 1880, it wasn't long until his company developed a string of incandescent lamps to be used for Christmas decorations. At first, one electrical string held eight bulbs, each the size of a walnut. But these lamps were expensive. By the 1930s, strings of lights became more affordable, and by the 1950s, they became standard decorations on the interior and exterior of American homes. Today, over 150 million sets of holiday lights are sold in the United States each year, lighting more than 80 million homes and consuming a whopping 6.6 billion kilowatt hours each December. In 2015, that was more than the country of El Salvador used the entire year, according to IGS Energy.

II. Holiday light decorations remind Christians of the restoration of righteousness.

Christmas lights are beautiful. But for Christians, they hold a much deeper meaning. In the Bible, darkness is the symbol for sin and light is the symbol for righteousness. So, lights at Advent and Christmas point us to the purpose of Christ's advent: to remove sin and restore us to righteousness.

The fall into sin brought spiritual darkness to humanity. People lived in the darkness of evil and deception. But God promised a light to break the darkness of sin. That light would appear with the advent of the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah foretold the luminous impact the coming of Christ would have: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone" (Isaiah 9:2). The prophet went on to announce this light breaking in through the birth of a child, the Son of God: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).

III. Lights point us to Christ's first advent.

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of Christ into the world. Jesus' birth was signaled by the light of a special star that guided the Wise Men (Matthew 2:1-2, 9-10); this brilliant astronomical beacon led them to the newborn King. His birth was also heralded by the luminous glory of the Lord that shone around the shepherds (Luke 2:9).

John's Gospel doesn't narrate the events of Jesus' birth, but it does describe the **impact** of that birth. John writes, "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (Jn 1:9). Jesus came to enlighten everyone with His own righteousness and glory. Later, when He had become an adult,

Jesus announced, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

By grace through faith, we who were once in the darkness of sin now receive Christ’s light of righteousness and glory. The apostle Paul declared, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The candles of the Advent wreath and the lights on the Christmas tree celebrate the first coming of Christ, “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

IV. Lights point us to Christ’s second advent.

These lights also point us to the second coming of Christ. Jesus’ return will usher in a new creation in which the darkness of sin ends, and the light of righteousness endures forevermore. We who are made righteous through faith in Christ will live eternally in that righteous realm.

The final chapters of the Bible use the symbolism of light to reveal the brilliant future Christ will inaugurate (usher in) for us with His second coming. Revelation 21:23–24 illustrates it this way: “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk.”

Today, we still see the darkness of sin in our fallen world and in our sinful nature. But we disavow that sin and repent of the darkness in us. Because of Christ’s righteousness that is credited to us by faith, we need never fear a dark future in eternity. Instead, we eagerly anticipate the final advent in which Jesus will disperse the darkness forever and bring us to dwell in His glorious light forever.

CONCLUSION

Light decorations are visible everywhere during this season, from candles to LEDs. They express a powerful message: the light of Christ’s righteousness has come to disperse the darkness of sin. That’s what Advent is all about—the eternal glory that Jesus won for us at His first coming and that we will experience fully at His second coming. On Christmas Eve, many churches like ours hold a candlelight service in which the flame is spread from the Christ candle in the chancel to the small candles held in the hands of all the gathered worshipers. This signifies that the coming of Christ brings the light of righteousness to all who believe.

So, when you look at Advent and Christmas decorations emanating light, remember their message: Jesus has come and will come again to bring you the ***light*** of His righteousness and glory!