

Lenten Wreath Supplies Powerful Symbol

by June A. Beck

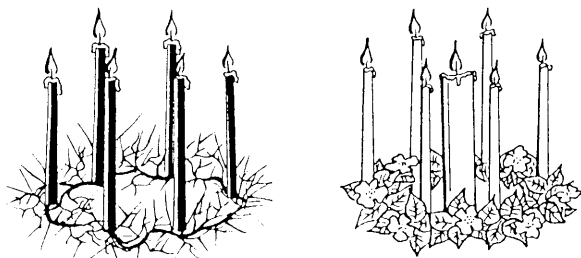
During Advent we anticipate and prepare ourselves for Christmas and the birth of Christ. The candles in the Advent Wreath help us keep track of the Sundays leading up to Christmas, reminding us of the four principal themes of Advent: hope, peace, joy and love.

One Advent Sunday, as the appropriate candles were lit, I began to think about Easter and the fast approaching Lenten Season. Advent finds a parallel in Lent, as both are seasons of preparation. While Advent has its fulfillment in Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus, Lent concludes with the Crucifixion, followed by the triumph of Easter.

I thought we might convey, in a visual way, the contrast of the seasons. Could we extinguish candles instead of lighting them? What about starkness instead of color?

After working through several ideas with our minister, we developed a Lenten Wreath which has proven itself to be a valid symbol of the season. It is filled with meaning for the congregation and especially those who actually participate by extinguishing the candles during the services.

Here are the suggestions for those who might like to create their own Lenten Wreath:



Illustrations by Joanne Kelly, Kokomo, Indiana

If possible, utilize the Advent Wreath frame used in December. Make extra bases or holders for the two additional candles, since Lent has six Sundays instead of the four of Advent. Wire hawthorn or pyracantha branches with *big* thorns all around the wreath (just the same as you would use greenery during Advent). Use enough thorn branches so that they can easily be seen by the congregation.

Use five purple candles and one black candle in the six holders. On the first Sunday of Lent *all* six candles are lit and at the appropriate moment in worship (usually following the

processional hymn) one person walks down the aisle with an acolyte's wand and extinguishes one purple candle. That person might pause before and after putting out the light, reflecting on what "people" did to Christ!

Many musical offerings come to mind to use as candles are being extinguished. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Each Sunday a person might sing (*a cappella*) a different stanza of "Were You There." This will include Easter with the stanza: "Were you there when they raised him from the dead?"
2. The organist may softly play variations on Choral Preludes such as "O Sacred Head."
3. The choir could sing an appropriate hymn or short anthem.
4. A time of total silence would be appropriate.

Each Sunday *all* six candles are lit by the ushers before worship and one more candle is extinguished.

Example:

Second Sunday - two purple candles extinguished
Third Sunday - three purple candles extinguished

Check the candles and be prepared to move them during the week so they won't burn out during the service. The chosen person would put out the shortest candle(s) each week excluding the black candle. Three black candles are needed for the six weeks since the one candle will burn for five worship services. The black candle will be put out *only* on Palm Sunday.

The Lenten Wreath ceremony can be a truly emotional experience for the person extinguishing the candles. Be sensitive to that and choose the people carefully. Use a different person each week: youth, married man, widow, widower, etc. Try to involve several groups within the church.

In addition to the Lenten Wreath, it had already been our custom to use no flowers on or beside the Communion Table during Lent. Instead, we use bouquets of thorns. Since it is difficult to see them otherwise, we drape purple ribbon sparingly through the thorns.

Easter

Remove all candles and thorns from the wreath. Use fresh flowers and live greenery. Wire the leaves on the wreath, first making sure to provide a very full, green base for the flowers that come next. Wire the flowers over the greenery. Use whatever is in bloom in the yard or call a florist for help. Use six white candles and the Christ candle from Advent.

At the same moment in worship, have one person walk down the aisle with a lighted acolyte wand. The person will light all six perimeter candles and the Christ candle while the soloist/organist/choir concludes whatever was begun six weeks earlier.

Altar Flowers: We use a mixture of all spring flowers for Easter—not just lilies. By using hyacinths, jonquils, daffodils, tulips, etc., and the lighted Lenten/Easter wreath, the sanctuary visually comes to life. The Lenten Wreath and the Easter Wreath have become important symbols in our services. I wish the same response for those of you who try these suggestions. □