DECK THE HALLS

by Gail Gaymer Martin
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Deck the Halls

An Advent
“Hanging of the Greens”
Celebration

by Gail Gaymer Martin
PARTICIPANTS

SCRIPTURE READERS
(One Scripture reader or as many as seven may be used.)

READERS
(One reader or as many as seven may be used.)

DECORATORS
(As needed)

CHOIR
(Optional)
PREFACE

Advent is a time of preparation and waiting, a time for adorning our homes and hearts in expectation and celebration of Jesus’ birth. Christians throughout the world decorate their homes and churches in preparation for the festive family gatherings and church pageants and services that characterize the Christmas season.

So that today’s Christians understand the meaning of Advent and its traditions, this “hanging the greens” service for the first Sunday of Advent focuses on the symbols of Christmas. These holiday decorations renew the customs of Christians in centuries past. The script shares the origin and meaning of each symbol as it touches our lives today. By shedding light on our Advent traditions, we also shed light on God’s gracious gift to his children, the birth of the babe born in Bethlehem so many years ago.
INTRODUCTION

In preparation for Christmas, this book contains a complete worship service celebrating the Advent “hanging of the greens.” Included in this book are the script to be used by the participants in the service, a list of the pre-planning activities and three appendices which include additional music options, an optional section for decorating the tree and an optional gift-giving portion of the service.

The service has been written to incorporate congregational involvement, with opportunities for individuals or families to participate. Clergy will open the service with a call to worship, then the origin and symbol explanations. The responsive readings and congregational prayer will need to be reprinted in your bulletin so the congregation can participate. Depending on your church’s style, decorations may be included in your bulletin.

The “hanging of the greens” is a symbolic service of preparation for Christmas. The congregation has two options with this worship format. First, they may decorate the worship space beforehand and add the final elements during the service. The second option is to begin the decorating during the worship service and complete it following the service. If a congregation does not include all of the ornamentations mentioned in the service, worship planners may easily omit that portion of the service.

One or more readers may present the origin and symbols portion of the service. The number of individuals needed to hang the greens and decorate the tree will be the decision of each congregation.

All scripture is taken from the New International Version of the Holy Bible. Each of the Bible verses is annotated so other versions may be easily substituted if desired.

Hymns are suggested, but choir anthems may replace congregational singing. Additional musical selections and hymn choices are included in Appendix A.
Two options for this service are available. The first involves the ornaments used to decorate the Christmas tree. If the congregation wishes to adorn the tree with special symbols centering around Christ, such as Christments then Appendix B should be used in conjunction with *The Christment Tree Pattern Book Volumes 1 and 2*, published by Meriwether Publishing Ltd.

The second involves gift-giving. In this service, a charity collection is included, designated by the congregation. This may be in the form of such benevolence donations as monetary gifts, packages for needy families in the communities, or gloves, hats, and scarves for the homeless. If a donation is not preferred, then a gift may be presented to those in attendance in the form of a candy cane. The symbolism for this part of the service is found in Appendix C. If desired, both gift-giving portions may be presented.
PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

Planning is necessary to prepare for a smooth, organized worship experience. Two types of preparation are necessary. First, have all the equipment on hand and arranged for easy access, as well as all of the locations marked for placement of the adornments. Second, the individuals and families who will be involved in the worship service need a quick rehearsal so they know when in the service they will be involved and what they must do. Below is a list of needs for each part of the service.

Advent Wreath and Candles
Advent stand and wreath
3 purple or blue candles
1 pink candle
1 lighter

Evergreens
Swags, wreaths, or pieces of roping easily hung during the service
Bows for ornamentation of the greens
Ladders

Poinsettias
Poinsettia plants with foil wrap — quantity to be decided by individual congregations
Designated locations for plants pre-marked for placement
*In many churches, poinsettias are paid for by congregational members as memorials, in honor or in thanksgiving with the dedication listed in the bulletin. These plants are either donated to the church or picked up after the service.*

Nativity Scene
A large Nativity scene
A table to hold the display

Christmas Tree and Star
Tree assembled with lights, star topper, and garland, if desired
Tree skirt in place
1 or 2 folding ladders readily available
3 adults: to assist in the placement of the ornaments
Ornaments arranged on a table in back of the congregation to be retrieved as needed
Gift Giving
Option A — A few gifts, wrapped or unwrapped, to be placed under the tree
Option B — Candy canes, placed in four to six baskets, in large enough quantity to provide one to each person. These may be distributed by the children of the congregation.

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(The SCRIPTURE READER[s] are positioned behind a lectern and remain there throughout the service.)

Prelude

Call to Worship (Jeremiah 33: 14-15)

PASTOR: The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line, he will do what is just and right in the land.

Hymn: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (Traditional)

Responsive Reading: Isaiah 11:1-6, 10

PASTOR: A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

ALL: The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord —

PASTOR: And he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;

ALL: But with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

PASTOR: Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

ALL: The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.

PASTOR: In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;

ALL: The nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.
The Meaning of Advent

PASTOR: Advent is a time of preparation, a time of penance, and a time of waiting. As we make ready for Christ’s coming, we prepare our homes with the symbols of Christmas, and we prepare our hearts by opening them to god’s promise and by showing our repentance. Then, in awesome anticipation, we wait, focusing our homes and hearts on God’s greatest gift to the world — his son, born as a tiny babe in a humble manger in Bethlehem. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we decorate this building, adorn our hearts and minds with your love and peace. Help us to focus with joy on the true meaning of Christmas. May the hope, peace, and joy of this season clothe us in your bountiful grace and love as we witness to the world your gift of salvation through the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

ALL: Amen.

The Advent Wreath

SCRIPTURE READER 1: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned (Isaiah 9:2).

The Origin and Symbol of the Advent Wreath

(READER 1 steps forward to the Advent wreath which should be in direct view of the congregation.)

READER 1: The origin of a burning wreath is found in the
traditions of pre-Christian Germanic people who burned the greens in the hope of spring following a long winter. In the sixteenth century throughout Germany, the Advent wreath became a traditional symbol for many Christians. The circle of evergreens, having no end and bearing four candles, reminds us of the eternal Christ, the light of the world. Each Sunday in Advent a new candle is lighted until all four glow on the fourth Sunday.

The three purple or blue candles represent the darkness of a sinful world. The pink candles represent the coming of the light. On the first Sunday of Advent, the first dark-hued candle represents hope, reminding us of God’s promise that Christ is our hope and our salvation. On the second Sunday of Advent, the candle symbolizes peace, reminding us that Jesus is the “Prince of Peace.” The third Advent candle represents joy, reminding us of the angel’s message, “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” (Luke 2:10-11). The pink Advent candle symbolizes love, reminding us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

PASTOR: Let us join in prayer:

ALL: Heavenly Father, you have given us hope in the promise of your Son. Today, we pray that you guide us in our preparation for Christ’s birth. As we light the first Advent candle, reminding us of the hope of our Salvation, fill our minds with peace and our hearts with joy. We thank you, Lord, for the gift of love you have given us in your Son. Amen. (The first Advent candle is lighted by READER 1 or another assistant. They then are seated.)
Hymn: “Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabella” (Traditional French)

Evergreens

SCRIPTURE READER 2: The rightedous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon, planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock ... ” (Psalm 92: 12-15).

The Origin and Symbol of Evergreens

(READER 2 steps forward with an ASSISTANT holding evergreen roping swag or a wreath.)

READER 2: Hanging greenery goes back to ancient Rome. Evergreen roping and wreaths were hung in homes and on buildings as a sign of victory. Evergreens include not only fir, cedar and pine, but also ivy, holly and rosemary. Christians continued to follow the practice of hanging greens as a symbol of Jesus’ victory over death. Evergreens offer a variety of symbols and traditions. Holly has become a sign of Christ’s Passion. The prickly leaves suggest the crown of thorns and the red berries, the blood that Jesus shed for our sins. A legend says the rosemary shrub is fragrant because Mary laid the Christ child’s garments on its branches. In the Middle Ages, rosemary was spread on the floor of homes at Christmas, and as people walked on it, a pleasant aroma filled the air. The evergreen also serves as a symbol of eternal life — always green, always fresh and alive, everlasting. Thus the evergreen is a symbol of the eternal promise of salvation and the everlasting God. The hanging of the greens has become a tradition of preparation for Christmas. (READER 2 sits.)
Responsive Reading: Peter 1:23-25

PASTOR: For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

ALL: For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

PASTOR: The grass withers and the flowers fall.

ALL: But the word of the Lord stands forever.” (Following the responsive reading, swags, roping, and/or wreath will be hung by individuals in predesignated areas during the hymn.)

Hymn: “The Holly and the Ivy” (Old French Melody)

Poinsettias

SCRIPTURE READER 3: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you” (Isaiah 60:1-2).

The Origin and Symbol of the Poinsettia

(READER 3 comes forward with an ASSISTANT or a number of individuals holding poinsettias.)

READER 3: The poinsettia is known in Central America as the “Flower of the Holy Night.” This blossom is a newer Christmas tradition beginning in the early nineteenth century when Dr. Joel Poinsett, our first ambassador to Mexico, introduced it to the United States. Its star shape reminds us of the Bethlehem star. Two legends have evolved from this flower. The first explains its origin. A little boy, having nothing to give the baby Jesus, prayed, and as he did, the flower grew at his feet. He picked the blossom and gave it to the Christ
child. The second legend tells us that the poinsettia was white, representing the purity of Christ, but when Jesus died on the cross, the blossom changed to blood red. So the star-shaped poinsettia reminds us of the holy night pointing us toward Good Friday. (READER 3 sits.)

**Responsive Reading:** Isaiah 35: 1-2

**PASTOR:** The desert and the parched land will be glad;

**ALL:** The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

**PASTOR:** Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;

**ALL:** It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. (During or before the hymn or anthem, undividuals will place the poinsettias in the designated areas.)

**Hymn:** “Lo, How a Rose Is Blooming” M. Praetorius Traditional

**The Nativity Scene**

**SCRIPTURE READER 4:** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger (Luke 2:15-16).

**The Origin and Symbol of the Nativity Scene**

**READER 4:** In the Middle Ages, when few people could read and church services were in Latin, carved figures were used to tell Bible stories, especially the story of Jesus’ birth, the Nativity. This scene bears many names: Nativity scene, Christmas manger, manger scene, and Crche, to name a few. St. Francis of Assisi is given credit for popularizing.
the manger scene in 1224 when he used a cave outside
a small Italian town and set up a manger scene with
live animals and real people. Jesus, the Christ child,
was life-size and was made of wax. Our manger scenes
today include camels — a common animal in the East.
They were called “Ships of the Desert.” The camel’s
presence reminds us of the wise men from the East who
came seeking the Christ child.

Responsive Reading: Micah 5:2-5

PASTOR: But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are
small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come
for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins
are from of old, from ancient times.

ALL: Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time
when she who is in labor gives birth ...

PASTOR: He will stand and shepherd his flock in the
strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the
Lord his God.

ALL: And he will be their peace.

Hymn: “Away in a Manger” (Traditional)

The Christmas Tree

(READER 5 comes forward. The Christmas tree stands in
front, unlighted.)

SCRIPTURE READER 5: Christ redeemed us from the
curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is
written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree”
(Galatians 3:13). He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that
brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we
are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

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In ancient times, trees and all nature were held in great reverence as a symbol of rebirth. During the season of Yule, trees were brought indoors and decorated as part of pagan worship. Because of this, trees were banned in many Christian churches until the church leaders studied the words of Isaiah 60:13, “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.”

Many legends have evolved about the Christmas tree. One of the oldest is said to have happened nearly one thousand years ago when St. Boniface, in protest to tree worshipers, cut down an oak tree, and to his amazement, a fir tree sprung from its roots. Another legend from the sixteenth century tells the story of Martin Luther, a German church reformer, who was inspired by the beauty of an evergreen tree lit by the stars on Christmas Eve. He cut down the tree, dragged it home, and lighted the limbs with candles to simulate the stars in the sky above Bethlehem.

But modern researchers believe the Christmas tree evolved from the Paradise tree which was part of the ancient “mystery plays” banned by the church in the fifteenth century. The Paradise tree, decorated with apples, told the story of Adam and Eve. No longer found in the church, people took the custom of the Paradise tree into their homes. During this same time, wooden Christmas pyramids were used on Christmas Eve, decorated with candles. In the late Middle Ages, glass bulbs and the Bethlehem star were added. These two customs seem the logical origin of our Christmas tree, reminding us of the tree on which Christ was crucified. It serves as a wonderful symbol of our
salvation and forgiveness through Jesus. (The Christmas tree is lighted. READER 5 is seated.)

The Christmas Star

(READER 6 comes forward.)

SCRIPTURE READER 6: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:1-2).

The Origin and Symbol of the Christmas Star

READER 6: The star serves as a symbol of Christmas in many ways. First, we remember the star of Bethlehem and the Magi following the star to find the Christ child. The Bible, in Revelation 22:16, also refers to Jesus as the Morning Star. “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” As well, the starlight is universal, its rays are seen everywhere, and so stars have become a symbol of peace throughout the world. (READER 6 sits.)

PASTOR: Loving, almighty Father, like the Magi, we follow the Christmas star waiting to worship the newborn King. As we decorate our Christmas trees, may you decorate our hearts and light our spirit, as we prepare for the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ.

ALL: Amen.

Hymn: “O Christmas Tree” (Traditional)

(Individuals come forward to place an ornament on the Christmas tree. The star is added on top.)
Christmas Gifts

(READER 7 comes forward and displays one of the wrapped gifts.)

SCRIPTURE READER 7: When [the wise men] saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh (Matthew 2:10-11).

The Origin and Symbol of Gift-Giving

READER 7: Gift-giving is an ancient practice. During the midwinter, giving gifts was practiced by the ancient German and Scandinavian tribes to celebrate Yule. St. Nicholas, born in Asia Minor, used his wealth to help the needy with unexpected gifts and many legends grew about him and his generosity.

The biblical account of the Magi bringing gifts to the Christ child may also have been the origin of Christmas gift-giving. Always, Christians embrace the birth of Jesus as God’s most precious gift to humankind. Others look to Christ’s unselfish and generous nature and believe that gift-giving is an attempt to emulate Jesus. During the Christmas season, most people become more generous and charitable.

An ancient legend might also be the motivation for Christmas generosity. The tale relates that on Christmas Eve the Christ child wanders the earth disguised as a beggar, seeking food and shelter. Any kindness or hospitality shown during this season is considered a gesture of love for Jesus. The Bible tells us. “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”
(Matthew 25:40). (READER 7 sits.)

PASTOR: During the hymn, let us reflect our love for Christ by showing our generosity for those in need as the Lord has done. Please bring your gifts forward and place them under the Christmas tree.

_Hymn:_ “We Three Kings” (John H. Hopkins Jr.) _During the singing of the hymn, individuals bring forward their gifts._

_The Closing_  
_Responsive Reading:_ Romans 13:11-12  

PASTOR: The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber,

ALL: Because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

PASTOR: The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

ALL: So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

_Benediction_  

PASTOR: And now Lord, Creator of all there is—trees, flowers, and light—be with us through this Advent season as we wait with patience for the coming of the Christ child. As we have adorned this place of worship, let our hearts shine adorned with your everlasting light. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem.

ALL: Amen.

_Closing Hymn:_ “As with Gladness Men of Old” (Konrad Kocher)

NOTE: The numerals running vertically down the left margin of each page of dialogue are for the convenience of the director. With these, he/she may easily direct attention to a specific passage.