

Advent 3, Year B, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today
is the third Sunday of Advent,
the third Sunday
of the season when we prepare for the coming of Christ,
both as a child in a manger
and again at the end of time.

And each year, we have the tradition of taking one of the Sundays of Advent
to decorate the Chrismon tree
a tree decorated
with symbols of our faith.
As we did last year,
instead of talking about all of the symbols
and putting them on one by one
we're going to focus on the major ones,
the ones that remind us most clearly
of the one for whom we wait,
and particularly
the ones that relate to our readings over the last three weeks.

The first Sunday of Advent
we read psalm 80
and were reminded of God
who is known to us as a shepherd,
one who loves us
and cares for us
even through
the most difficult times.
And of course,
Jesus himself, the one for whom we wait,
the Good Shepherd
who lays down his life
for the sheep.

[crook and sheep]

That first Sunday
we were also reminded that in Advent, we wait not only for the baby in the manger, but also

for Christ who will come again
as ruler and judge.

And so we have a symbol that is two letters, the alpha and omega. They are the first and last letters of the greek alphabet,
and stand for the beginning and end of all creation.

In Revelation chapter 22, Jesus says: ‘See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’

And we also have a crown.

It reminds us that Jesus is king of kings and Lord of lords.

A month or so after Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended to be with God. The book of Revelation describes him as enthroned with God. Remember the hymn,

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne,
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.

[alpha and omega and crown]

And that leads us to last week,
where we were reminded
of the terrible power of evil in the world,
and our own tendency to sin.
But because Jesus laid down his life for us on the cross,
we are forgiven.

Evil and sin
longer have power over us.

Remember the story of the angel visiting Mary, which we read in the gospel of Matthew?
“You will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

And so we put crosses
on our Chrismon tree.

There is the regular cross, with one long arm and three short ones. That’s the kind of cross that Jesus was most likely crucified on.

Then there is the Greek cross, where all the arms are the same length. This was the kind of cross used by the early church in Greece. We use it today as a symbol of blessing.

The Jerusalem cross is like a Greek cross, but with a smaller cross in each corner. Some people think that the big cross symbolizes the wound in Christ's side when the Roman soldier pierced it with his spear, and the small crosses are the wounds in his hands and feet. Other people say that the four small crosses symbolize the four gospels, or the four directions in which the Word of Christ spread from Jerusalem.

And the cross with a diagonal line across the bottom is mostly used by Eastern Orthodox churches. The line represents a board on the cross that held Christ's feet, made crooked in his pain. And sometimes it has an extra line across the top, for the sign that was hung above him, the King of the Jews.

Sometimes you see a celtic cross, which has a circle around it, a symbol of the sun, to remind us of the life and light that God gives, and of eternity, with no beginning or end.

And then there is the anchor cross, which is like an anchor but with a line across it. Some early Christians used it when it was illegal to believe in Jesus. The line made a cross, but because it looked like an anchor, it was like a secret cross that let other Christians know you were a believer.

And you'll notice that all the crosses are empty - none of them has Jesus on it. That reminds us that Jesus didn't stay dead, but rose again, and that we will rise with him into resurrected life.

[crosses]

Now we come to today's readings.
 And the overwhelming theme of them is joy.
 Joy
 that God will bring good news
 to the oppressed,
 to the brokenhearted,
 to captives and prisoners;
 to those who mourn;
 and to all of us
 who are followers
 of Jesus Christ,

And so we have two new chrismons.

I struggled to find traditional symbols of joy,
 so one is the word joy
 and the other one
 is a smiley face.

[joy, smiley]

And our gospel reading today
 is about the prophet John the Baptist
 who calls on the people to prepare the way of the Lord.
 It fits with our theme the last couple of months, walking the way.
 And so we have a Chrismon of a path.

[path]

And at the end of the path
 as you've seen it on our bulletin each week in advent,
 is a star,
 the star that leads the way
 for the people of God,
 and the star that announced the the birth of a new king
 to the wise men from the east.
 They followed the star
 all the way
 to the place where Mary and Joseph were staying
 with their baby, Jesus
 where they gave gifts
 and knelt before the newborn king.
 It's a five pointed star
 that reminds us of them.
 And a six pointed star
 to remind us that Jesus was born a Jew, descended from king David.

And there are other stars, star with seven and nine points,
 to star remind us of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. After his resurrection, Jesus breathed
 his spirit, the Holy Spirit, into the disciples, and that spirit worked in them and transformed them.
 And that Holy Spirit lives in us too, working in us and transforming us -
 we who have been called by God, as Romans reminds us,
 and called to live as saints.

And four pointed star
 remind us that Jesus who was born for us
 also died for us.

[Stars]

And finally, we look forward
to next week's reading
when we will hear
the story of the angel appearing to Mary,
and will read her words of celebration
in the Magnificat.

And so we have an angel symbol,
and two symbols for Mary,
a flower,
and a fleur de lis.

[angel, flower, fleur de lis]

All these symbols
point us to the one for whom we continue to wait, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And I invite you this week
to use the symbols of our Christen tree
as a focus for meditation.
Choose a couple of symbols, perhaps connected with our readings today,
and think about what they reveal of how God is at work in your life,
and invite God
to continue that work.
In the name of Christ.
Amen.