

Advent 4, Year A, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the fourth Sunday of Advent,
the last 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.

But this year
we're going to do it a little differently.
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 today.
And you might want to take time after the service
or in the next couple of Sundays
to look at the other ones, and think about what else they remind us of.

And it all begins
with a star.

At Christmas,
we usually think of 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.

But the idea of something that shines forth
to lead the people of God
goes back much further,
as we heard in our psalm today.
“Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.”

This psalm
calls on God as the Shepherd of Israel
to lead the people,
to shine
so they can follow.

And of course,
when we hear the word, shepherd,
who do we think of?
Jesus,
the Good Shepherd.

[crook and sheep]

But back to the star.

We're also reminded in our readings from the prophet Isaiah, the letter to the Romans
and from the gospel according to St Matthew
that Jesus is
descended from King David,
and so we have the star of David,
the six pointed star.

And there are other star, 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, on a cross with four arms.
That's what makes him different from every other baby who is born,
because in his death, we are forgiven,

as the angel told Matthew,
 “[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

[place star on tree]

But four pointed star aren't the only way we remember that Christ died for us and brought us forgiveness. We have crosses.

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.

[place crosses on tree]

Those are the symbols of Jesus
 that connect most clearly with our readings today,
 focussing

on the one who was born in Bethlehem.

But we also have signs of Jesus who will come again.

The first one is 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.

Crown him the Lord of life,
 who triumphed o'er the grave,
 and rose victorious in the strife
 for those he came to save.
 His glories now we sing,
 who died, and rose on high,
 who died, eternal life to bring,
 and lives that death may die.

[place crown on tree]

The next symbol, also from the book of Revelation, 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.’

[place alpha and omega on tree]

And remember how the gospel according to John begins this way,
 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

And so we have a symbol of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God in three persons. It is three interwoven circles, which are wound together to show the unity of God. The fleur-de-lis is another symbol of the Trinity, with its three points.

[place Trinity circles and fleur de lis on tree]

All these symbols
point us to the one for whom we continue to wait, Jesus Christ our Lord. And the point of a
Chrismon tree
is not simply a way of sneaking Christmas decorations into the church
during Advent.
It is a way to focus our attention and prayer and worship.
And so I encourage you to use the tree
as a focus for meditation.
choose one symbol
and think about what it reveals of how God is at work in your life,
and invite God
to continue that work.
In the name of Christ.
Amen.