



# HINES MEMORIAL

## CHRISTIAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

### ADVENT/CHRISTMASTIDE 2011

HOPE, PEACE, JOY, LOVE; **CHRIST**

#### WARMER THROUGH FELLOWSHIP

**ANNUAL CHRISTMAS FELLOWSHIP ON WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21 AT 5:15 P.M.** Your presence will bless others as well as you. The following groups are asked to prepare covered dishes: stewardesses -- desserts, pastor -- bread and beverage, missionaries and trustees -- salads, stewards and all others -- vegetables. *Timothy* and *Spirit* will be our hosts this year.

#### STRONGER THROUGH WORSHIP

- MUSIC OF PRAISE, MEDITATIONS FOR ADVENT, AND LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLE EACH WEEK
- CHURCH SCHOOL PRESENTATION, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 8.30 A.M.
- DECEMBER 25, CHRISTMAS DAY WORSHIP, 8.30 A.M.; BREAKFAST; CHRISTMAS DAY CARING AND SHARING DINNER

#### DEEPER THROUGH DISCIPLESHIP

<b>NOVEMBER 27</b>	The First Sunday in Advent	Isaiah 7.14 <b>HOPE . . . AND SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL</b> Rosa Jackson, Messenger
<b>DECEMBER 4</b>	The Second Sunday in Advent	Luke 3.4-6 <b>PEACE . . . AND ALL FLESH SHALL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD</b>
<b>DECEMBER 11</b>	The Third Sunday in Advent	Luke 2.10 <b>JOY . . . FEAR NOT . . . I BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS</b> Mack Booker, Worship Leader; Henry Searcy, Messenger
<b>DECEMBER 18</b>	The Fourth Sunday in Advent	Luke 2.11 <b>LOVE . . . UNTO YOU IS BORN A SAVIOR</b> Church School Presentation (8.30 A.M.)
<b>DECEMBER 25</b>	The First Sunday in Christmastide	Luke 2.5-14 <b>CHRIST . . . TODAY, GOD WILL SHOW HIS LOVE IN THE MOST MIRACULOUS WAY . . . THROUGH THE GIFT OF HIS SON . . .</b> <b>TODAY WILL BE THE BIRTH OF JESUS, THE CHRIST . . . TODAY, HEAVEN TOUCHES EARTH!</b> Worship, 8.30 A.M. (Sanctuary) Breakfast to follow Christmas Day Caring and Sharing Dinner
<b>JANUARY 1</b>	The First Sunday in Christmastide	Isaiah 9.6

**Christ:**

***His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace***

#### BROADER THROUGH MINISTRY AND LARGER THROUGH EVANGELISM

To share our love for Christ and to share His love with others, we are asking each family member to prepare at least one **\$20 BASKET/BOX** for one of the men or women who eat breakfast with us on Sundays. Please bring the gifts to Family Night on December 21. The gifts will be distributed at the Christmas Day Caring and Sharing Dinner. **PLEASE NOTIFY BETTY WILSON OR ME** if you will prepare a basket(s). We need 65 for men, 10 for women, and 5 for children. Suggested items include socks, tee shirts, personal items (toothpaste, soap, deodorant, etc.) wash cloths, towels, socks, belt, bottled hand sanitizer, cookie tins, candy, hand games, etc., -- be creative. This has become a very meaningful part of our holiday celebration both in our giving and in the lives of those who receive. Please share again!!!

# THE SEASON OF ADVENT: ANTICIPATION AND HOPE

Dennis Bratcher

Advent is the beginning of the Church Year for most churches in the Western tradition. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas day, which is the Sunday nearest November 30, and ends on Christmas Eve (Dec 24). If Christmas Eve is a Sunday, it is counted as the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve proper beginning at sundown.

## THE COLORS OF ADVENT

Historically, the primary sanctuary color of Advent is **Purple**, the color of royalty to welcome the Advent of the King. The purple of Advent is also the color of suffering used during Lent and Holy Week. This points to an important connection between Jesus' birth and death. The nativity, the Incarnation, cannot be separated from the crucifixion, the Atonement. The purpose of Jesus' coming into the world, of the "Word made flesh" and dwelling among us, is to reveal God and His grace to the world through Jesus' life and teaching, but also through his suffering, death, and resurrection.

However, many churches now use blue to distinguish the Season of Advent from Lent. **Royal Blue** is sometimes used as a symbol of royalty. Some churches use **Bright Blue** to symbolize the night sky, the anticipation of the impending announcement of the King's coming, or to symbolize the waters of Genesis 1, the beginning of a new creation. Red and Green are more secular colors of Christmas, although they derive from older European practices of using evergreens and holly to symbolize ongoing life and hope that Christ's birth brings into a cold world.

The word **Advent** means "coming" or "arrival." The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Advent. Thus, Advent is far more than simply marking a 2,000 year old event in history. It is celebrating a truth about God, the revelation of God in Christ whereby all of creation might be reconciled to God. That is a process in which we now participate, and the consummation of which we anticipate. Scripture reading for Advent will reflect this emphasis on the Second Advent, including themes of accountability for faithfulness at His coming, judgment on sin, and the hope of eternal life.

In this double focus on past and future, Advent also symbolizes the spiritual journey of individuals and a congregation, as they affirm that Christ has come, that He is present in the world today, and that He will come again in power. That acknowledgment provides a basis for Kingdom ethics, for holy living arising from a profound sense that we live "between the times" and are called to be faithful stewards of what is entrusted to us as God's people. So, as the church celebrates God's in breaking into history in the Incarnation, and anticipates a future consummation to that history for which "all creation is groaning awaiting its redemption," it also confesses its own responsibility as a people commissioned to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and to "love your neighbor as yourself."

## THE SPIRIT OF ADVENT

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing. There is a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out from their bitter oppression. It is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet who have hope of deliverance from a God who has heard the cries of oppressed slaves and brought deliverance!

It is that hope, however faint at times, and that God, however distant He sometimes seems, which brings to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth and justice and righteousness over His people and in His creation. It is that hope that once anticipated, and now anticipates anew, the reign of an Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace and justice and righteousness to the world.

Part of the expectation also anticipates a judgment on sin and a calling of the world to accountability before God. We long for God to come and set the world right! Yet, as the prophet Amos warned, the expectation of a coming judgment at the "Day of the Lord" may not be the day of light that we might want, because the penetrating light of God's judgment on sin will shine just as brightly on God's people.

Because of this important truth, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Season of Advent has been a time of fasting and penitence for sins similar to the Season of Lent. However, a different emphasis for the season of Advent has gradually unfolded in much of the rest of the church. The season of Advent has come to be celebrated more in terms of expectation or anticipation. Yet, the anticipation of the Coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament and Judaism was not in connection with remembrance of sins. Rather, it was in the context of oppression and injustice, the longing for redemption, not from personal guilt and sin but from the systemic evil of the world expressed in evil empires and tyrants. It is in that sense that all creation groans for its redemption as we witness the evil that so dominates our world (Rom 8:18-25).

Of course, there is the problem of longing for vindication from an evil world when we are contributors to that evil. This is the power of the images of Amos when he warns about longing for the "Day of the Lord" that will really be a day of darkness (Amos 5:18-20). Still, even with Amos' warning the time of Advent is one of expectation and anticipation, a longing for God's actions to restore all things and vindicate the righteous. This is why during Advent we as Christians also anticipate the Second Coming as a twin theme of the season. So, while some church traditions focus on penitence during Advent, the spirit of that expectation from the Old Testament is better captured with a joyous sense of expectancy. Rather than a time of mourning and fasting, Advent is celebrated as a time of joy and happiness as we await the coming of the King. (see [Can We Sing Christmas Carols During Advent?](#))

There will be time enough during the rest of the journey through the Church Year to remember our sins. It begins in Epiphany when we hear about the brotherhood of the Kingdom, and realize our failure to effect it. Then as we move toward and through Lent we realize that the coming of Jesus served more to lay bare our own sin than it did to vindicate our righteousness. There will be time to shed Peter's bitter tears as we realize that what started with such possibility and expectation has apparently ended in such failure.

It is only as we experience that full cycle, beginning with unbridled joy in Advent that slowly fades into the realization of what we have done with and to the Christ, that the awful reality of Good Friday can have its full impact. And in that realization we can finally be ready to hear the Good News on Resurrection Sunday! That is the journey that the disciples took. And so there is value in taking the same journey beginning with the anticipation and joy of Advent!

So, we celebrate with gladness the great promise in the Advent, yet knowing that there is also a somber tone as the theme of threat is added to the theme of promise. This is reflected in some of the readings for Advent, in which there is a strong prophetic tone of accountability and judgment on sin. But this is also faithful to the role of the Coming King who comes to rule, save, and judge the world.

Because of the dual themes of threat and promise, Advent is a time of preparation that is marked by prayer. While Lent is characterized by fasting and a spirit of penitence, Advent's prayers are prayers of humble devotion and commitment, prayers of submission, prayers for deliverance, prayers from those walking in darkness who are awaiting a great light! The spirit of Advent is expressed well in the parable of the bridesmaids who are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom. There is profound joy at the Bridegroom's expected coming. And yet a warning of the need for preparation echoes through the parable. But even then, the prayer of Advent is still: Come, O Come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel!

## **EVERGREENS AND THE ADVENT WREATH**

The beginning of Advent is a time for the hanging of the greens, decoration of the church with evergreen wreaths, boughs, or trees that help to symbolize the new and everlasting life brought through Jesus the Christ. Some churches have a special weekday service, or the first Sunday evening of Advent, or even the first Sunday morning of Advent, in which the church is decorated and the Advent wreath put in place. This service is most often primarily of music, especially choir and hand bells, and Scripture reading, along with an explanation of the various symbols as they are placed in the sanctuary.



**The Advent wreath** is an increasingly popular symbol of the beginning of the Church year in many churches as well as homes. It is a circular evergreen wreath (real or artificial) with five candles, four around the wreath and one in the center. Since the wreath is symbolic and a vehicle to tell the Christmas story, there are various ways to understand the symbolism. The exact meaning given to the various aspects of the wreath is not as important as the story to which it invites us to listen, and participate.

The **circle of the wreath** reminds us of God Himself, His eternity and endless mercy, which has no beginning or end. The **green of the wreath** speaks of the hope that we have in God, the hope of newness, of renewal, of eternal life. **Candles** symbolize the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His son. The **four outer candles** represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent, which themselves symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ.

The **colors of the candles** vary with different traditions, but there are usually three purple or blue candles, corresponding to the sanctuary colors of Advent, and one pink or rose candle. One of the purple candles is lighted the first Sunday of Advent, a Scripture is read, a short devotional or reading is given, and a prayer offered. On subsequent Sundays, previous candles are relighted with an additional one lighted. The pink candle is lighted on the third Sunday of Advent.

The **light of the candles** itself becomes an important symbol of the season. The light reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world that comes into the darkness of our lives to bring newness, life, and hope. It also reminds us that we are called to be a light to the world as we reflect the light of God's grace to others (Isa 42:6). The progression in the lighting of the candles symbolizes the various aspects of our waiting experience. As the candles are lighted over the four week period, it also symbolizes the darkness of fear and hopelessness receding and the shadows of sin falling away as more and more light is shed into the world. The flame of each new candle reminds the worshippers that something is happening, and that more is yet to come. Finally, the light that has come into the world is plainly visible as the Christ candle is lighted at Christmas, and worshippers rejoice over the fact that the promise of long ago has been realized.

The **first candle** is traditionally the candle of **Expectation** or **Hope** (or in some traditions, Prophecy). This draws attention to the anticipation of the coming of a Messiah that weaves its way like a golden thread through Old Testament history. As God's people were abused by power hungry kings, led astray by self-centered prophets, and lulled into apathy by half-hearted religious leaders, there arose a longing among some for God to raise up a new king who could show them how to be God's people. They yearned for a return of God's dynamic presence in their midst.

And so, God revealed to some of the prophets that indeed He would not leave His people without a true Shepherd. While they expected a new earthly king, their expectations fell far short of God's revelation of Himself in Christ. And yet, the world is not yet fully redeemed. So, we again with expectation, with hope, await God's new work in history, the second Advent, in which He will again reveal Himself to the world. And we understand in a profound sense that the best, the highest of our expectations will fall far short of what our Lord's Second Advent will reveal!

The **remaining three candles** of Advent may be associated with different aspects of the Advent story in different churches, or even in different years. Usually they are organized around characters or themes as a way to unfold the story and direct attention to the celebrations and worship in the season. So, the sequence for the remaining three Sundays might be Bethlehem, Shepherds, Angels. Or Peace, Joy, Love. Or John the Baptist, the Magi, Mary. Or the Annunciation, Proclamation, Fulfillment. Whatever sequence is used, the Scripture readings, prayers, lighting of the candles, the participation of worshippers in the service, all are geared to telling the story of redemption through God's grace in the Incarnation.

The **third candle** for the Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally Pink or Rose, and symbolizes **Joy** at the Advent of the Christ. Sometimes the colors of the sanctuary and vestments are also changed to Rose for this Sunday. Whatever sequence is adopted for these Sundays, the theme of Joy can still be the focus. For example, when using the third Sunday to commemorate the visit of the Magi the focus can be on the Joy of worshipping the new found King. Or the Shepherds as the symbol for the third Sunday brings to mind the joy of the proclamation made to them in the fields, and the adoration expressed as they knelt before the Child at the manger.

The **center candle** is white and is called the **Christ Candle**. It is traditionally lighted on Christmas Eve or Day. However, since many Protestant churches do not have services on those days, many light it on the Sunday preceding Christmas, with all five candles continuing to be lighted in services through Epiphany (Jan 6). The **central location of the Christ Candle** reminds us that the incarnation is the heart of the season, giving light to the world.

## CELEBRATING ADVENT

Advent is one of the few Christian festivals that can be observed in the home as well as at church. With its association with Christmas, Advent is a natural time to involve children in activities at home that directly connect with worship at church. In the home an Advent wreath is often placed on the dining table and lighted at meals, with Scripture readings preceding the lighting of the candles, especially on Sunday. A new candle is lighted each Sunday during the four weeks, and then the same candles are lighted each meal during the week. In this context, it provides the opportunity for family devotion and prayer together, and helps teach the Faith to children, especially if they are involved in reading the daily Scriptures.

It is common in many homes to try to mark the beginning of Advent in other ways as well, for the same purpose of instruction in the faith. Some families decorate the house for the beginning of Advent, or bake special cookies or treats, or simply begin to use table coverings for meals. An **Advent** Calendar is a way to keep children involved in the entire season. There are a wide variety of Advent calendars, but usually they are simply a card or poster with windows that can be opened, one each day of Advent, to reveal some symbol or picture associated with the Old Testament story leading up to the birth of Jesus. One unique and specialized Advent calendar that can be used either in the home or the sanctuary is a Jesse Tree. (We have available an online Advent calendar with devotionals for each day of Advent as well as Christmas through Epiphany Day: NazNet's Advent and Christmas Celebration). All of these provide opportunities to teach children the significance of this sacred time, and to remind ourselves of it as well.

In congregational worship, the Advent wreath is the central teaching symbol of the season, the focal point for drawing the congregation into the beginning of the story of redemption that will unfold throughout the church year. For this reason, members of the congregation are often involved in lighting the Advent candles and reading the appropriate Scriptures each Sunday. While in some churches it is customary for this to be done by families, it can also be an especially good opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the entire community of Faith by including those without families, such as those never married, divorced, widowed, elderly who live by themselves, or college students away from home.

## AN ADVENT REFLECTION

It is truly a humbling experience to read back through the Old Testament and see how frail and imperfect all the "heroes" actually are: Abraham, the coward who cannot believe the promise, Jacob, the cheat who struggles with everybody, Joseph, the immature and arrogant teen, Moses, the impatient murderer who cannot wait for God, Gideon, the cowardly Baal-worshipper, Samson, the womanizing drunk, David, the power abusing adulterer, Solomon, the unwise wise man, Hezekiah, the reforming king who could not quite go far enough, and finally, a very young Jewish girl from a small village in a remote corner of a great empire.

It never ceases to amaze me why God could not have chosen "better" people to do His work in the world. Yet if God can use them, and reveal Himself through them in such marvelous ways, it means that He might be able to use me, inadequate, and unwise, and too often lacking in faith that I am. And it means that I need to be careful that I do not in my own self-righteousness put limits on what God can do with the most unlikely of people in the most unlikely of circumstances. I think that is part of the wonder of the Advent Season.

## THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

Among all the festivals and holidays of the Christian Church year, Christmas remains the most observed and most popular. Of course, much of that popularity, especially in the West, is due to the commercial promotion of the holiday. In many areas of the world, it is still a rather insignificant holiday even among Christians. Still, the Christmas story captures the heart in a way that transcends all the commercial hype.

The degree to which the holiday is valued in Christian culture even goes beyond the other most Holy Day of Christianity, Easter or Resurrection Sunday. There is something about human nature that would rather focus on the birth of babies than on the torture and death of accused criminals! Especially for the young, the story of Christmas with all the images of angels and a young mother, of shepherds and a stable, of wise men and royal intrigue make the season captivating. Perhaps that is part of the intent of the different ways the story is told in the Gospel accounts, as well as the preservation of so many traditions in the church surrounding this holiday.

Historically, Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to a young maiden from Galilee. Theologically, Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ, the self-revelation of God to the world in human form for the reconciliation of humanity to Himself. All the details of the various accounts concerning Jesus' birth revolve around that central truth (see The Meaning of Christmas below).

While we most often think about Christmas as a single day, it is actually a season of the year. In its popular sense, it extends four weeks before Christmas Day and for two weeks after. However, the time before Christmas is a special season called Advent, comprising the four Sundays before Christmas Day. While the entire season of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany can be seen together, they each have distinctly different roles in the Church year. The term "Advent" means "coming" and is a season of expectation and hope, the time of waiting for the coming of the Messiah that is celebrated at Christmas. This time of waiting symbolizes the waiting throughout the Old Testament for the new act of God that would bring deliverance to his people. For Christians this season of expectation also symbolizes the waiting in anticipation for the Second Coming of the Christ when he will return and restore all things (see The Season of Advent).

Contrary to advertising campaigns that tout Christmas as beginning with Advent (or Halloween!), the actual Christmas Season in most Western church traditions begins at sunset on Christmas Eve, December 24, and lasts through January 5. Since this time includes 12 days, the season of Christmas is known in many places as the Twelve Days of Christmas. January 6 is usually celebrated as Epiphany, although it carries different significance in various church traditions. Due to different calendars in use in various eras and locations of the church, some cultures and church traditions celebrate Christmas on January 6 (in the older Julian calendar still used as the religious calendar in Eastern Churches, January 6 corresponds to December 24 on our modern calendar).

## THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY

The origins of the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, as well as the dates on which they are observed, are rooted deeply in the history of the early church. There has been much scholarly debate concerning the exact time of the year when Jesus was born, and even in what year he was born. Actually, we do not know either. The best estimate is that Jesus was probably born in the springtime, somewhere between the years of 6 and 4 BC. The lack of a consistent system of timekeeping in the first century, mistakes in later calendars and calculations, and lack of historical details to cross reference events has led to this imprecision in fixing Jesus' birth. This suggests that the Christmas celebration is not an observance of a historical date, but a commemoration of the event in terms of worship.

As important as Christmas is in our modern religious culture today, the actual celebration of this holiday as a central part of the church year is a relatively recent phenomenon. Most historians agree that the celebration of Christmas did not begin until about the fourth century, although they are not certain exactly how or why Christmas began as a Christian festival.

The most commonly accepted conclusion is Christmas originated in Roman culture that celebrated the winter solstice on December 25 (the solstice is the point where the sun's ecliptic, or apparent path in the sky, is at its furthestmost northern and southern point, occurring by our calendar around June 22 and December 22; in the northern hemisphere, we note these days today as the beginning of Summer and Winter). This was a pagan celebration of the birth of the sun (*Natalis Solis Invicti*) as it once again began its annual journey back north from its southernmost point through the heavens. This marked the change of seasons that promised springtime and renewal of the earth. Christians were reluctant to participate in the pagan festivals, yet the cultural and social pressures to participate were enormous. By the early fourth century, Christians began celebrating the birth of Jesus at this time, so it is likely that Christmas was an alternative to the pagan observance of the winter solstice.

Because of the differences in calendars in use at that time, the Eastern Church celebrated the Incarnation on what is January 6 on our western calendars (although on their calendars this corresponded to December 24), also as an alternative to pagan solstice festivals. Today, most of the Eastern churches (with the exception of Russian Orthodox) follow the Western practice of celebrating Christmas on December 25. However the Western churches also adopted the January 6 date and used it to observe what is now called Epiphany. In effect, the Eastern churches adopted December 25th from the West and the western churches adopted January 6 from the East, and now both are observed in both traditions.

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The traditions surrounding the celebration of this season are almost as numerous as the people who celebrate it. Through the years, the holiday has been adapted to local customs, culture, and history and so has produced an amazing variety of Christmas traditions around the world. Some, such as the giving of gifts or the use of a star, arose directly or indirectly out of the biblical nativity stories. Some, such as the legends of Saint Nicholas, have their origin in church history, historical fact that became legendary as it was embellished in story. Others, such as the use of evergreens and the yule log, have pagan origins but were transformed into distinctively Christian traditions. Others, such as the use of a crèche or caroling, arose first as local traditions in certain countries or regions that became widely adopted. And still others, such as, reindeer, elves, the North Pole, etc., have largely secular origins and are only loosely associated with the holiday in popular imagination or marketing techniques.

## THE ORIGIN OF "XMAS"

The abbreviation of "Xmas" for Christmas, long reviled by many conservative and Low Church Christians, is not nearly as blasphemous as many contend. Rather than a sacrilegious removal of "Christ" from Christmas and replacing him with an unknown, as some claim, the "Xmas" abbreviation has a long history in the church. In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was first written, "chi" (c or C), which is almost identical to the Roman alphabet "X," is the first letter of the word "Christ" (cristoV, or as it would be written in older manuscripts, CRISTOS). In fact, the symbol of the fish in the early church came from using the first letter of several titles used for Jesus (Jesus Christ Son of God Savior) that when combined spelled the Greek word for fish (icquV, *ichthus*).

In the early days of printing when typesetting was done by hand and was very tedious and expensive, abbreviations were common. The church began to use the abbreviation C for the word "Christ" in religious publications. From there, the abbreviation moved into general use in newspapers and other publications, and "Xmas" became an accepted way of printing "Christmas."

## THE BIBLICAL NATIVITY NARRATIVES

Even though Christmas is the most popular and most celebrated of the Christian Holy Days, it is interesting that it does not play such a central role in the biblical traditions or the Gospel accounts. Nativity narratives are conspicuously absent in both Mark and John who begin their Gospels with the ministry of John the Baptist, some 30 years after Jesus' birth. This helps explain why John the Baptist and his ministry is usually the focus of one Sunday during Advent (usually the second Sunday). Nativity narratives are only present in Matthew and Luke. But even there, the story is not told as a single narrative in either Gospel, but rather each emphasizes different aspects of what we have come to celebrate as the Christmas story.

Matthew tells the story from the perspective of Joseph, and his deliberations about what he should do with his pregnant wife-to-be. The story unfolds with reassurance from God's messenger that God is at work in this extraordinary circumstance. It is Matthew who introduces the Isaiah quotation from which we get the title Emmanuel for Jesus. However, Matthew gives us no details about the actual birth of Jesus, only a few events leading up to the birth, and then an account of what happened "after Jesus was born."

It is only in Matthew that we learn of the visit of the Magi ("wise men") and the miraculous star in the East that led them to Jesus. It is popular imagination, and perhaps the need to construct a concise story that can fit into a crèche (the traditional manger scene), that places the Magi at the Bethlehem stable. It was probably much later, perhaps as much as two years, when they actually visited the Christ child. And it is likewise legend or tradition that assumes three Magi, probably from the fact of three gifts. However, the biblical narrative never says how many Magi came.

Only Matthew recounts God's warning to Joseph, telling him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child to escape the wrath of Herod. He also tells of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem as the deranged Herod sought to eliminate any competition for his throne. Matthew also again tells of messenger from God that directs the Holy Family to settle in Nazareth

Most of the nativity narrative with which we are most familiar from Christmas plays and public Scripture readings comes from Luke's Gospel. Luke's account is much different than Matthew's. It is told from the perspective of Mary, and her struggle to come to terms with this astonishing event. Luke actually begins his narrative with the miraculous birth of John the Baptist and the disbelief of his father

Zechariah. The entire narrative places two women, Elizabeth and Mary, at the center of the story. A messenger of God, in Luke's account named Gabriel, also plays an important role announcing the births of both John and Jesus.

Only Luke incorporates the blessing of Elizabeth on Mary that became part of the "Hail Mary" prayer of the Catholic Rosary. Likewise, it is only Luke who tells the nativity narrative through the beautiful songs of Mary (the *Magnificat*), Zechariah (the *Benedictus*), and Simeon (the *Nunc Dimittis*), and the praises of Anna. It is Luke who places the entire story in the context of Roman taxation and tells of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is again largely legend and tradition that has made "no room at the inn" an important feature of the story. This detail and mention of the manger occupies only a single verse in the story, and is never referred to again in the New Testament beyond Luke 2. From Luke we learn of the visit of the shepherds, and the messengers of God proclaiming Jesus' birth. Again, it is tradition that has the angels singing in the heavens; Luke only tells us that they were "praising God." Finally, Luke tells us of the return of the Holy Family to the temple eight days after Jesus' birth for his official naming and ritual circumcision.

These differences suggest that even though the early church knew many details of Jesus' birth, the Gospel writers were not too concerned with making those details the center of the Gospel story. That should provide us a large caution in considering the role we allow these events to play in the life of the Church. A careful examination of both Matthew and Luke reveals that the differing details they include are not for the purpose of constructing a nativity narrative for its own sake. Rather, they are incorporated into the larger narrative for specific reasons that have to do with the overall theological structure and communication of each Gospel. That does not mean that we must abandon the celebration of Christmas! But at the very least, it should lead us to ask questions of the significance of this season in the cycle of the Christian Church Year.

## THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

What is the true meaning of Christmas? It is a perennial question. It is a question heard often during the Christmas season year after year, from pulpits, TV personalities, newspaper writers, and just ordinary people bewildered by the hectic pace of the season. It seems a little strange that as popular as this season seems to be, we should continually have to ask that question. The meaning of Christmas seems to be forever in danger of being obscured by all the commotion and promotion of the season. Perhaps we continue to ask the question for fear that the answer will be lost, or already is lost, in the shuffle.

So, the search for the true meaning of Christmas is a recurring one. And yet, too often the answers we provide, even from the church, are more sentimentality, comfortable traditions, or "warm fuzzies" than they are any deep reflection on the significance of the Incarnation for humanity. As much as those things are a part of the season, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" is not the meaning of the season. It is not about the "spirit of giving" or the quest for global peace, or the importance of family, or the beauty of a snow-decorated "silent night."

Sure, we can immediately say that Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. But exactly why is that fact so significant beyond the affirmation of a historical fact or a creedal confession? How does, or how should, the meaning of Christmas impact our lives on a daily basis as the people of God?

Perhaps for an answer, we need to return to the biblical narratives, apart from all the traditions that we have heaped around them to make them more entertaining and more coherent to modern ways of thinking. At the heart of the nativity narratives in both Matthew and Luke, is a simple fact: amid the struggle of a people who had longed for 500 years for God to act in the world in new ways, God came to be with them in a way that totally identified himself with us, as human beings. Amid the most unlikely of circumstances, to the most unlikely of people, God became man for the salvation of all people.

I think that the true meaning of Christmas is about possibility. It is not the kind of possibility that comes from a confidence in our own skill, knowledge, ability, or a positive mental attitude. It is possibility that comes solely from the fact that God is God, and that he is the kind of God who comes into our own human existence to reveal himself and call us to himself. It is a possibility that is so surprising at its birth that we are caught unaware, and so are left with wonder at the simplicity of its expression in this infant child. It is a possibility that is easily symbolized by a helpless infant that has nothing of its own by which to survive; but an infant that, because he is Immanuel, God with us, will forever change the world and all humanity. It is this same God who has promised to be with us, with his people, with the church and with us individually, as we live as his people in the world.

It is not just hope, as if it were wishful thinking that things will get better when they cannot. It is hope incarnated into flesh, a hope that can be held in a mother's arms, a hope that expresses a reality that will live beyond endings and death itself. It is the hope, the possibility, that springs from impossible and insignificant beginnings, infused with the power of God through the Holy Spirit, that will blossom into a light to the nations.

It is this possibility, this God, that we celebrate at Christmas. And we do so with a confidence born, not of our own desire for it to be so, but from the birth of a child over 2,000 years ago, a child who was the Son of God!

## THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

The **Twelve Days of Christmas** are probably the most misunderstood part of the church year among Christians who are not part of liturgical church traditions. Contrary to much popular belief, these are not the twelve days *before* Christmas, but in the Western Church are the twelve days from Christmas until the beginning of Epiphany (January 6th; the 12 days count from December 25th until January 5th).

The origin of the Twelve Days is complicated, and is related to differences in calendars, church traditions, and ways to observe this holy day in various cultures (see Christmas). In the Western church, Epiphany is traditionally celebrated as the time the three Wise Men or Magi arrived to present gifts to the young Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). In some cultures, especially Hispanic and Latin American culture, January 6th is observed as Three Kings Day, or simply the Day of the Kings (Span: *la Fiesta de Reyes, el Día de los Tres Reyes, or el Día de los Reyes Magos*; Dutch: *Driekoningendag*). Even though December 25th is celebrated as Christmas in these cultures, January 6th is often the day for giving gifts. In some places it is traditional to give Christmas gifts for each of the Twelve Days of Christmas. Since Eastern Orthodox traditions use a different religious calendar, they celebrate Christmas on January 7th and observe Epiphany or Theophany on January 19th.

By the 16th century, some European and Scandinavian cultures had combined the **Twelve Days of Christmas** with (sometimes pagan) festivals celebrating the changing of the year. These were usually associated with driving away evil spirits for the start of the new year.

The **Twelfth Night** is January 5th, the last day of the Christmas Season before Epiphany (January 6th), and often included feasting along with the removal of Christmas decorations. French and English celebrations of **Twelfth Night** included a **King's Cake**, remembering the visit of the Three Magi, and ale or wine (a King's Cake is part of the observance of Mardi Gras in French Catholic culture of the Southern USA). In some cultures, the **King's Cake** was part of the celebration of the day of Epiphany.

The popular song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is usually seen as simply a nonsense song for children. However, some have suggested that it is a song of Christian instruction dating to the 16th century religious wars in England, with hidden references to the basic teachings of the Faith. They contend that it was a mnemonic device to teach the catechism to youngsters. The "true love" mentioned in the song is not an earthly suitor, but refers to God Himself. The "me" who receives the presents refers to every baptized person who is part of the Christian Faith. Each of the "days" represents some aspect of the Christian Faith that was important for children to learn.

However, many have questioned the historical accuracy of this origin of the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. It seems that some have made an issue out of trying to debunk this as an "urban myth," some in the name of historical accuracy and some out of personal agendas. There is little "hard" evidence available either way. Some church historians affirm this account as basically accurate, while others point out apparent historical discrepancies. However, the "evidence" on both sides is mostly in logical deduction and probabilities. One internet site devoted to debunking hoaxes and legends says that, "there is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that the song 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' was created or used as a secret means of preserving tenets of the Catholic faith, or that this claim is anything but a fanciful modern day speculation ..." What is omitted is that there is no "substantive evidence" that will disprove it either.

It is certainly possible that this view of the song is legendary or anecdotal. Without corroboration and in the absence of "substantive evidence," we probably should not take rigid positions on either side and turn the song into a crusade for personal opinions. That would do more to violate the spirit of Christmas than the song is worth. So, for the sake of historical accuracy, we need to acknowledge this uncertainty.

However, on another level, this uncertainty should not prevent us from using the song in celebration of Christmas. Many of the symbols of Christianity were not originally religious, including even the present date of Christmas, but were appropriated from contemporary culture by the Christian Faith as vehicles of worship and proclamation. Perhaps, when all is said and done, historical accuracy is not really the point. Perhaps more important is that Christians can celebrate their rich heritage, and God's grace, through one more avenue this Christmas. Now, when they hear what they once thought was a secular "nonsense song," they will be reminded in one more way of the grace of God working in transforming ways in their lives and in our world. After all, is that not the meaning of Christmas anyway?

**ON THE 1ST DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

#### A Partridge in a Pear Tree

The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, whose birthday we celebrate on December 25, the first day of Christmas. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge that feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, recalling the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered you under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but you would not have it so . . ." (Luke 13:34)

#### **ON THE 2ND DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Two Turtle Doves

The Old and New Testaments, which together bear witness to God's self-revelation in history and the creation of a people to tell the Story of God to the world.

#### **ON THE 3RD DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Three French Hens

The Three Theological Virtues: 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Love (1 Corinthians 13:13)

#### **ON THE 4TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Four Calling Birds

The Four Gospels: 1) Matthew, 2) Mark, 3) Luke, and 4) John, which proclaim the Good News of God's reconciliation of the world to Himself in Jesus Christ.

#### **ON THE 5TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Five Gold Rings

The first Five Books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah or the Pentateuch: 1) Genesis, 2) Exodus, 3) Leviticus, 4) Numbers, and 5) Deuteronomy, which gives the history of humanity's sinful failure and God's response of grace in the creation of a people to be a light to the world.

#### **ON THE 6TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Six Geese A-laying

The six days of creation that confesses God as Creator and Sustainer of the world (Genesis 1).

#### **ON THE 7TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Seven Swans A-swimming

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1) prophecy, 2) ministry, 3) teaching, 4) exhortation, 5) giving, 6) leading, and 7) compassion (Romans 12:6-8; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

#### **ON THE 8TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Eight Maids A-milking

The eight Beatitudes: 1) Blessed are the poor in spirit, 2) those who mourn, 3) the meek, 4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, 5) the merciful, 6) the pure in heart, 7) the peacemakers, 8) those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matthew 5:3-10)

#### **ON THE 9TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Nine Ladies Dancing

The nine Fruit of the Holy Spirit: 1) love, 2) joy, 3) peace, 4) patience, 5) kindness, 6) generosity, 7) faithfulness, 8) gentleness, and 9) self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

#### **ON THE 10TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Ten Lords A-leaping

The ten commandments: 1) You shall have no other gods before me; 2) Do not make an idol; 3) Do not take God's name in vain; 4) Remember the Sabbath Day; 5) Honor your father and mother; 6) Do not murder; 7) Do not commit adultery; 8) Do not steal; 9) Do not bear false witness; 10) Do not covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

#### **ON THE 11TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...**

Eleven Pipers Piping

The eleven Faithful Apostles: 1) Simon Peter, 2) Andrew, 3) James, 4) John, 5) Philip, 6) Bartholomew, 7) Matthew, 8) Thomas, 9) James bar Alphaeus, 10) Simon the Zealot, 11) Judas bar James. (Luke 6:14-16). The list does not include the twelfth disciple, Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus to the Romans.

## ON THE 12TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME...

### Twelve Drummers Drumming

The twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed: 1) I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. 2) I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. 3) He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. 4) He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell [the grave]. 5) On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. 6) He will come again to judge the living and the dead. 7) I believe in the Holy Spirit, 8) the holy catholic Church, 9) the communion of saints, 10) the forgiveness of sins, 11) the resurrection of the body, 12) and life everlasting.

## Christmas Symbols



### The Date of Christmas

The idea to celebrate Christmas on December 25 originated in the 4th century. The Catholic Church wanted to eclipse the festivities of a rival pagan religion that threatened Christianity's existence. The Romans celebrated the birthday of their sun god, Mithras during this time of year. Although it was not popular, or even proper, to celebrate people's birthdays in those times, church leaders decided that in order to compete with the pagan celebration they would themselves order a festival in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the actual season of Jesus' birth is thought to be in the spring, the date of December 25 was chosen as the official birthday celebration as Christ's Mass so that it would compete head on with the rival pagan celebration. Christmas was slow to catch on in America. The early colonists considered it a pagan ritual. The celebration of Christmas was even banned by law in Massachusetts in

colonial days.

### Mistletoe and Holly

Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Druids used mistletoe to celebrate the coming of winter. They would gather this evergreen plant that is parasitic upon other trees and used it to decorate their homes. They believed the plant had special healing powers for everything from female infertility to poison ingestion. Scandinavians also thought of mistletoe as a plant of peace and harmony. They associated mistletoe with their goddess of love, Frigga. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe probably derived from this belief. The early church banned the use of mistletoe in Christmas celebrations because of its pagan origins. Instead, church fathers suggested the use of holly as an appropriate substitute for Christmas greenery.



### Poinsettias

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He brought the plants to America in 1828. The Mexicans in the eighteenth century thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the Poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow. But surrounding the flower are large, bright red leaves, often mistaken for petals.

### The Christmas Tree



The Christmas Tree originated in Germany in the 16th century. It was common for the Germanic people to decorate fir trees, both inside and out, with roses, apples, and colored paper. It is believed that Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was the first to light a Christmas tree with candles. While coming home one dark winter's night near Christmas, he was struck with the beauty of the starlight shining through the branches of a small fir tree outside his home. He duplicated the starlight by using candles attached to the branches of his indoor Christmas tree.



The

Christmas tree was not widely used in Britain until the 19th century. It was brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans in the 1820's.

## **Xmas**

This abbreviation for Christmas is of Greek origin. The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. During the 16th century, Europeans began using the first initial of Christ's name, "X" in place of the word Christ in Christmas as a shorthand form of the word. Although the early Christians understood that X stood for Christ's name, later Christians who did not understand the Greek language mistook "Xmas" as a sign of disrespect.

## **The Candy Cane**

Candy canes have been around for centuries, but it wasn't until around 1900 that they were decorated with red stripes and bent into the shape of a cane. They were sometimes handed out during church services to keep the children quiet. One story (almost certainly false) that is often told about the origin of the candy cane is as follows:

In the late 1800's a candy maker in Indiana wanted to express the meaning of Christmas through a symbol made of candy. He came up with the idea of bending one of his white candy sticks into the shape of a Candy Cane. He incorporated several symbols of Christ's love and sacrifice through the Candy Cane. First, he used a plain white peppermint stick. The color white symbolizes the purity and sinless nature of Jesus. Next, he added three small stripes to symbolize the pain inflicted upon Jesus before His death on the cross. There are three of them to represent the Holy Trinity. He added a bold stripe to represent the blood Jesus shed for mankind. When looked at with the crook on top, it looks like a shepherd's staff because Jesus is the shepherd of man. If you turn it upside down, it becomes the letter J symbolizing the first letter in Jesus' name. The candy maker made these candy canes for Christmas, so everyone would remember what Christmas is all about.

## **Santa Claus**

The original Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious from an early age, devoting his life to Christianity. He became widely known for his generosity for the poor. But the Romans held him in contempt. He was imprisoned and tortured. But when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he allowed Nicholas to go free. Constantine became a Christian and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Nicholas was a delegate to the council. He is especially noted for his love of children and for his generosity. He is the patron saint of sailors, Sicily, Greece, and Russia. He is also, of course, the patron saint of children. The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive. In 16th century Holland, Dutch children would place their wooden shoes by the hearth in hopes that they would be filled with a treat. The Dutch spelled St. Nicholas as Sint Nikolaas, which became corrupted to Sinterklaas, and finally, in Anglican, to Santa Claus. In 1822, Clement C. Moore composed his famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nick," which was later published as "The Night Before Christmas." Moore is credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly fat man in a red suit.

## **Christmas Tree And Ornaments**

### **History**

- Christmas Tree
  - Many legends concerning the origin of the Christmas Tree
  - Legend #1
    - Germany, before Jesus was born, people would decorate evergreen trees during winter solstice ceremonies.
    - St. Boniface (8th century) was a missionary to Germany.
    - He used the three points (triangle) of the Christmas Tree as a symbol for the Trinity.
    - Legend about St. Boniface says that one day he came upon some people who were going to sacrifice a child to one of their gods, symbolized by an oak tree. In order to save the child's life, St Boniface cut the oak tree down with an ax. A fir tree sprang from the stump of the fallen oak. St. Bonifacae then told the people that the fir tree stood for the eternal life of Christ. This legend is most likely a story that symbolizes how he replaced the worship of the gods (the oak tree) with Christianity (the fir tree).
  - Legend #2
    - (16th century) Martin Luther was walking home from a Christmas Eve service in the forest. Some say he saw the stars shining through the evergreen trees. Others say he saw the stars reflected off the icicles. The

lights reminded him of Jesus, the Light of the World. He cut a small tree and took it home. He placed candles on the branches to reflect what he saw.

#### Legend #3

- Germany, used as prop in medieval play about Adam and Eve
- called "Paradise Tree"
- preformed annually on Dec 24th
- apple trees no longer had their leaves or fruit, so evergreen trees were hung with apples instead
- later wafers were hung on the tree to symbolize the eucharist (communion)
- eventually cookies and sweets replaced the wafers

#### ○ Legend #4

- Reform Church (now Lutheran Church) in 1800's, tree is often biblical reference to cross, evergreen because of everlasting life. They decorated it with roses, representing Rose of Sharon, and single candle at the top representing Light of the World (Christ).

#### ○ Read more about Christmas Trees

- The Chronologic History of the Christmas Tree
- The History of Christmas Trees
- The Christmas Tree Legends

#### ● Ornaments

- early trees decorated with fruit, nuts, flowers. later cookies and other foods and candles were added.
- Star or Angel on top of tree
  - both in night sky the night Jesus was born
- Lights
  - stars of the heavens
  - (16th century) Martin Luther was walking home from a Christmas Eve service in the forest. Some say he saw the stars shining through the evergreen trees. Others say he saw the stars reflected off the icicles. The lights reminded him of Jesus, the Light of the World. He cut a small tree and took it home. He placed candles on the branches to reflect what he saw.
- Glass Bulbs
  - German glass blower developed first glass bulbs to replace heavier ornaments
- Tinsel
  - legend, poor family unable to afford decorations for their tree, spiders covered the tree in webs during the night. some traditions add that either the Christ Child or the rising sun turned the webs to silver
  - The Christmas Cobwebs by Odds Bodkin

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- Christmas Tree
  - evergreen: symbol of eternal life
  - tree: biblical reference to cross
- Ornaments
  - Ornaments in general remind us of all of the beautiful things Jesus did
  - Star or Angel on top of tree
    - Star of Bethlehem (the one the wise men followed) and Angels who announced Christ's birth
  - Lights
    - Jesus is light of the world
  - Ball Ornaments
    - our world was created by God; the different colors remind us that the Gospel is for all different nations and peoples on the earth
  - Tinsel
    - Generosity and kindness to the poor

### Bible Verse

- *Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. (John 5:24)*

## December 25

### History

- Most scholars agree that Christ was born in Autumn, not December (John the Baptist was born at Passover [Spring] and Jesus was born 6 months later). Early Christians did not feel the need to celebrate Christ's birth. They were busy preparing for the Lord's return, which, like most peoples, they felt would be in their lifetimes.
- The Encyclopedia Romana tells us that "at the time of the winter solstice (December 25 in the Julian calendar), Saturnus, the god of seed and sowing, was honored with a festival... the Saturnalia did continue to be celebrated as Brumalia (from "bruma," winter solstice) down to the Christian era, when, by the middle of the fourth century AD, its rituals had become absorbed in the celebration of Christmas."
- Mithras was a god of Persia and India. Mithras was said to be the god of the sun, triumphing over darkness. The day of his birth was celebrated on December 25, as the winter solstice was widely believed to be the time when the sun was 'reborn.'
- The first occurrence of recognition of Jesus' birthday was in 354 A.D. Slowly, over the years, all Christian churches began to recognize it as well.
- December 25th was the date of the winter solstice on the Julian calendar. Because the Julian calendar lost one day every 128 years, Christmas was on December 22nd in 325 A.D. and by 1582 it had moved to December 12th. Pope Gregory restored the date of Christmas to December 25. The word Christmas comes from Middle English Christemasse, from Old English Cristes mæsse, meaning literally Christ's Mass.
- So, why is Christmas celebrated on December 25? Hoping to convert the unsaved to Christ, the early Christians chose December 25 to give new meaning to the pagan traditions. Christmas was celebrated near Saturnalia and the feast of Mithras, *not* as an evolution of them, but to *combat* the existing festivals. The Christian leaders chose the date to try and civilize the roudy pagan customs, and to use the time to proclaim the birth of the true Son, Jesus.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- What do we think of when we celebrate Christmas? Is it the pagan god of Saturnalia? Or the mythical Mithras? No, we think of the Lord Jesus. I have to think that the early church fathers were thinking of Romans 12:21 when they set the date for celebrating the birth of our Saviour. *Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.* (Romans 12:21)

### Bible Verse

- *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.* (1 John 4:4)

## Santa Claus, Elves, and Reindeer

### History

- fat, jolly, red suit trimmed in white fur, usually carrying a sack of toys; sleigh flies through the air, pulled by eight reindeer - Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Donder, Blitzen. Visits on Christmas Eve after everyone has gone to bed and leaves gifts under the Christmas tree and in the stockings for good children. Enters the house through the chimney.
- European roots; Saint Nicholas - Saint Nicholas was said to have saved sailors from a storm, was a defender of children, and often gave generous gifts to the poor. He became known as the traditional giver of gifts throughout Europe.
- He was called Sankt Nikolaus in Germany, Sanct Herr Nicholass or Sinter Klass in Holland. He was said to ride through the sky on a horse and was often accompanied by Black Peter, who would whip naughty children.
- The feast day of Nicholas is traditionally observed on December 6. Eventually, the two holidays were combined. Later German Protestants encouraged recognizing the Christkindl (Christ child) as the giver of gifts. Christkindl evolved into Kris Kringle, yet another name for Santa Claus. Santa Claus goes by other names in other lands, such as Père Noël in France, Julenisse in Scandinavia, and Father Christmas in England.
- The American Santa Claus developed out of the Dutch legend of Sinter Klass in the 17th and 18th century. Washington Irving, in 1809 wrote about the arrival of St Nicholas on horseback. The more recent changes in Santa, from the way he looks, to the names of his reindeer, were largely brought about in 1823 by the book *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*, more commonly recognized as *The Night Before Christmas* by Clement C. Moore.
- Then, in the 1860's, he was refined yet again by the cartoonist Thomas Nast, who called him Santa Claus.
- Elves most likely came from the Scandinavian countries; Elves (gnomes) were already a tradition, and they could be either helpful or mean-spirited, depending on whether the person was naughty or nice; in mid-1800's Scandinavian writers 'revealed' their true purpose was as helpers to Father Christmas.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- Read *Why Jesus is Better than Santa Claus*

### Bible Verse

- *Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.* (John 13:16)

# St. Nicholas and Stockings

## History

- (Remember when reading about Saint Nicholas that many of the legends are quite fanciful, and often give the saint supernatural powers, such as control of the weather, ability to 'appear' in dreams, etc. Many times the stories that might have a basis in truth have been expounded on and he has in many cases given attributes normally reserved for Jesus.) Read about Saint Nicholas in these books:
  - The Miracle of Saint Nicholas by Gloria Whelan
  - The Real Santa Claus by Marianna Mayer
  - The Saint Nicholas Secret by Dennis E. Engleman
- lived in Myra (what is now Turkey) in 3rd & 4th centuries AD
- christian man, helped poor
- gave gifts to the poor (sometimes secretly at night) because of his deep love for christ
- his feast day is December 6 because he died on Dec 6 or 7.

## Modern Christian Symbolism

- Saint Nicholas was a wonderful example of how christians should use their faith to help others. We can follow his example by giving to the poor and showing kindness and patience to the elderly and children.

## Bible Verse

- (Luke 18:16) *But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*

# Candy Canes

## Modern Christian Symbolism

- Candy Cane: Jesus
- Hard candy: because jesus is our rock
- White: purity
- Red stripes: Christ's blood
- Green Stripes: everlasting life in Him
- Thick stripe: His sacrifice, His death
- 3 thin stripes: trinity, our own sacrifices (giving), the lashes Jesus took for our sins
- Peppermint: remind us of the spices offered to the christ child, part of hyssop family (referred to in OT as used for cleansing)
- Shape: shepherd's staff, "J" for Jesus

## Bible Verse

- (Psalm 31:3) *For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me.*

# Xmas

## History

- We find in encyclopedia.com "the formal Greek correspondent of x was chi... like ch in loch. As the initial of the name Christ, X has become a symbol for it, e.g., in Xmas"
- The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. In the 1500's, Xmas became popular as a shortened form of the word Christmas. It was during this time that Europeans used the first letter in Christ's name (Xristos) to shorten the word Eventually, "Xmas" became an acceptable alternative to the whole word, Christmas.

## Modern Christian Symbolism

- The X in Christmas stands for Christ.

## Bible Verse

- (2 Timothy 2:19) *Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.*

## Activity

- Make an X ornament out of your favorite craft material. (fabric, tinfoil, homemade clay, etc)
- Look up the word Xmas in the dictionary and write it in your language/spelling notebook. Use the word Xmas in an article or advertisement.

# Carols (Songs)

## History

- Christmas carols are songs that we sing at Christmas time. Most have a religious or festive theme. Many carols tell a story. Most were poems that were later set to music.
- Some people believe that carols became popular as a way to express the joy of the birth. Christmas carols are often joyful, bouncy songs, whereas the church music of the time was somber. Carols were, at first, banned from the church ceremonies. Later, a man by the name of Saint Francis of Assisi introduced carols into the church service during a Christmas Midnight Mass in a cave in Greccio in 1223.
- During the Middle Ages the people began putting on special holiday plays, many notably about the nativity. Carols would be sung at these plays. After the service, the people would leave the play still singing the songs.
- Much of the beauty of the Christmas Carols is because of the warm memories they evoke. Many people still go door to door singing these carols. Some like to sing them around their Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. They can be heard throughout the holiday season.

## Modern Christian Symbolism

- Legend has it that the angels sang the first Christmas Carols the night Jesus was born. In Christmas carols, even those who are not Christians lift the Lord's name and sing of his wonderful birth.

## Bible Verse

- (Psalm 126:2) *Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."*

## Christmas Plants

### History

- Mistletoe
  - Sacred to ancient druids; symbol of eternal life; used them in sacrifices to their gods at winter solstice; priests in white robes cut them down in a special ceremony; it was also hung over doorways to ward off evil and bring happiness, health, and good luck
  - kissing under mistletoe; Scandinavian goddess named Frigga; her son Balder was shot with an arrow made of mistletoe; her tears (or her friends while she cried) saved the son and Frigga ordered mistletoe should not be used to harm others again; Frigga made the mistletoe a symbol of love instead and kissed anyone standing under it; thus, mistletoe became symbol of peace
  - symbol of peace to Romans; kissing under mistletoe Roman custom
- Holly
  - There are many varieties of holly. The most well known is a type that has red berries and dark, shiny, thorny green leaves. The holly is often in stark contrast to the white European landscape, making it a natural symbol of life.
  - The Teutonic people placed holly around their homes to ward off evil spirits and bad weather. In England, the thorny holly was referred to as male, and the smooth holly was female. Tradition has it that the first type brought into the house foretells who will rule the household for the next year, the man or the woman. For the sake of marital harmony, they sometimes brought them in at the same time.
  - Ancient Druids believed that the holly was favored by their sun god. They thought that the holly was inhabited by spirits, and they brought it indoors to give the spirits shelter from the winter weather.
  - Later, Europeans believed holly to be a good luck charm against bad weather.
- Poinsettias
  - According to Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary, *poinsettia* is pronounced both *poin-se-tee-ah* and *poin-se-tah*.
  - The poinsettia plant was named after Joel Roberts Poinsett who imported it from Mexico in 1828. According to an old Mexican legend, a poor boy had nothing to give the Christ Child on Christmas. He prayed sincerely, and a plant, called The Flower of the Holy Night, grew at his feet in the brilliant Christmas colors, red and green.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- Mistletoe
  - peace; (Luke 2:14) *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*
- Holly
  - Because the holly leaf has sharp, pointy edges, the holly plant is used to remind us of the crown of thorns Jesus wore on his head. The red berries remind us of the blood he shed on the cross.
- Poinsettias
  - Remind us that Jesus will meet all our needs.

### Bible Verse

- (Matthew 27:29) *When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"*

## Gifts and Wise Men

### History

- The giving of gifts as Christmas is an old tradition. The first Christmas gifts were given by the wise men to Jesus. Read the story of the wise men. (Matthew 2:1-12) *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*
- The gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh
  - gold: for a king
  - frankincense: for a god - used in worship
  - myrrh: for a man - used in preparing a body for burial

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- God sent the perfect gift, in the person of Jesus, to save us. The gift of a baby, in itself, is nothing more than a nice story to be read on Christmas Eve. It's the power of the death and resurrection that the true meaning of the gift becomes clear. (Matthew 20:28) *Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. We give gifts to honor God's most precious gift of hope for mankind.*

### Bible Verse

- (Matthew 7:11) *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*

## Colors of Christmas

### History

- Colors often become associated with holidays through natural connections. Pastel colors are used in spring festivals because of the beauty of the newly forming flowers. Reds, golds, and browns are symbolic of autumn holidays. The Christmas colors are no different. White was a natural choice because of the snow on the ground in the winter time. Reds and greens of winter plants contrast with the white landscape, giving them natural preference as well.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- In Christian tradition, these colors take on special meanings:
- Red - Christ's blood shed for our sin on the cross. (John 19:34)
- Green - Eternal life in Christ. (John 3:16-17)
- White - The purity of Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Gold - Christ the Divine (Rev. 3:18)
- Silver - Redemption in Christ (Matt. 27:3-9)

### Bible Verse

- (Isaiah 1:18) *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*

## Candles, Lights

### History

- Pagan winter festival often used candles and fires to 'drive away the forces of darkness.'

- Candles were given as gifts during Saturnalia.
- To the Christians, the candles signified that Jesus was the Light of the world.
- People throughout Europe still place Christmas candles in their windows and use candles in holders on their trees instead of lights.
- St. Lucia wears a crown of candles in Sweden on Saint Lucia Day (December 13)
- Candles are used during the Christian advent season to remind us of the coming Light.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- Jesus is the Light of the world; also used to 'light the way' for the Christ Child

### Bible Verse

- (John 8:12) *Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

## Star

### History

- We often use stars in decorations at Christmastime to remember the Star of Bethlehem which led the wise men to the Christ Child. (Matthew 2:1-2) *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*
- The Star of Bethlehem was an astronomical phenomenon that alerted the wise men of Jesus' birth. Some believe that the star was a supernova or comet, others a conjunction of planets. Theories are that is most likely happened around the year 7 BC, the probable year of the birth of Christ.
- The top of the Christmas tree is often adorned with the star to represent the Star of Bethlehem high in the sky.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- The star stands for the Star of Bethlehem which led the wise men to the Christ Child.

### Bible Verse

- (Matthew 2:10) *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

## The Nativity

### History

- Scenes of the Nativity are drawn directly from the bible. Even though the "three" wise men are often in the nativity scene, they did not appear until Jesus was much older, and the bible does not specifically state how many wise men there were.
- The Nativity Scenes have Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus in a Manger, and often include the stable, an angel or star, livestock, shepherds, and wise men.
- Francis of Assisi made the first nativity in 1223 with live animals and people.
- Sometimes called the crèche (pronounced 'kresh'), meaning a representation of the Nativity scene.

### Modern Christian Symbolism

- The nativity is to remind us of the 'reason for the season' and to 'put Christ back in Christmas'.

### Bible Verse

- (Luke 2:11) *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

## Angels

### History

- God used angels to proclaim the coming of the messiah, and then again to announce the birth of Jesus. God sent the angel Gabriel, specifically, to announce to Mary that she would be the mother of the Christ.
  - (Luke 1:26-38) *And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be*

*born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.*

- Angels appeared to shepherds in the field to announce to them the birth of Christ.
  - (Luke 2:9-16) *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds*

### **Modern Christian Symbolism**

- We should be as the angels and use the holiday season to announce the glory of the birth of the christ child.

### **Bible Verse**

- (Luke 2:13-14) *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

## **Cards**

### **History**

- Sir Henry Cole, from England, was said to be the first person to give a Christmas card.
- The first Christmas card was designed in 1843 by J.C. Horsley. One thousand of these cards were produced and sold in London.
- Louis Prang printed the first Christmas cards in America in 1875. He set up nationwide contests for the best Christmas designs, which were used on his cards.
- Even from the beginning the designs on the Christmas cards were as varied as Christmas traditions themselves, though they often depicted warm, comfortable home scenes, nature scenes, or nativity themes.

### **Modern Christian Symbolism**

- Christmas cards are an expression of love to those dearest to you.

### **Bible Verse**

- (Luke 2:10) *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

## **Bells**

### **History**

- During the Middle ages bells were rung with increasing frequency until midnight, supposedly to warn the devil of the approaching birth of the Christ Child.
- Church bells were also used to announce church services and Midnight Mass.
- Bells were also rung at pagan winter celebrations. It was thought that evil spirits could be driven out by loud noises, and bells often accompanied singing and shouting.
- Bells are mentioned in the Old Testament as being used on the robes of the high priest. The people would have known, by the noise of the bells, that the high priest was offering sacrifices for their sins.

### **Modern Christian Symbolism**

- Bells remind us that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, and the ringing of the bells at midnight reminds us of the reason he came.

### **Bible Verse**

- (Hebrews 7:27) *Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.*

## **Nutcrackers**

### **History**

- Even before Tchaikovsky's famous ballet, The Nutcracker, made the toy popular they were a common Christmas gift. Especially among the poor, they were a beautiful and useful gift that could be made from a piece of scrap wood. After Tchaikovsky's ballet the nutcrackers were usually dressed as soldiers or government officials.

#### **Modern Christian Symbolism**

- A German proverb says "God gives us the nuts but we have to break them ourselves". Nutcrackers remind us that nothing in life should come without hard work.

#### **Bible Verse**

- (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9) *For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.*