



# *A Book of Christmas*

- *Advent*
- *Holiday/Holy Day*
- *Hanukkah*
- *Christmas Greenery*
- *Merry Xmas?*
- *Christmas Carols*
- *Santa Claus*
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- *A Christmas Prayer*



**F**or most Christians, the Christmas season begins on the Sunday nearest November 30th. This date is the feast day of Saint Andrew, one of the twelve apostles of Christ. The nearest Sunday is the first day of Advent, a four-week period during which Christians

prepare for the celebration of Christmas. The word advent, from Latin, means “the coming,” and refers to the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day.

Advent has probably been observed since the fourth century. Originally, it was a time when Christian converts readied themselves for baptism. During the Middle Ages, Advent became associated with preparation for the Second Coming of Christ.

In early days, Advent lasted from November 11, the feast of St. Martin, until Christmas Day. Advent was considered a pre-Christmas season of Lent when Christians devoted themselves to prayer and fasting. The Orthodox Eastern Church observes a similar Lenten season, from November 15 until Christmas, rather than Advent. Many Christians still view Advent as a season to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ.

Many Christians have an Advent wreath in their homes during the holiday season. Most of these wreaths are made of evergreen or holly branches and may lie on a table or hang on a door. 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 we have in God, the hope of renewal and eternal life.

Four candles, one for each Sunday of Advent, are placed among the branches, and symbolize the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ. An additional white candle is placed in the center and is lighted on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

One candle is pink. Three candles are dark purple. Some churches and families use royal blue candles in place of purple, as royal blue can also



signify royalty. Purple, however is the traditional color for the season of Advent. Purple was the most expensive dye in ancient times and was used by kings to indicate their royalty. Purple also signifies the repentance and patience of God's people as they await the arrival of their Lord.

The story of the Advent is symbolized in the lighting of each candle; from Christ's First Advent (Coming), to His awaited Second Advent (Coming). These truths can be represented in a variety of teachings from the Bible, and represented on the Advent wreath, as well as marked for scripture readings and prayers during the lighting. Because Advent wreaths are an informal celebration, not all are the same. The exact meaning given to the various aspects of the wreath is not as important as the story it tells.

A purple candle is lighted the first, second, and fourth Sunday of Advent, and typically symbolizes Hope, Peace, and Love. The pink candle is reserved for the third Sunday of Advent and symbolizes Joy. In addition to the four Advent candles, most Advent wreaths also have a larger, white candle in the center called the Christ candle. This candle is either lighted on Christmas Eve or Day, or both, and represents the First Advent of Christ, His Birth.

In many countries, people use special Advent calendars or Advent candles to keep track of the 24 days before Christmas. An Advent calendar has a colorful Christmas scene, and each date is printed on a flap. One flap is lifted daily to uncover a holiday picture or a Biblical verse. On an Advent candle, the dates appear in a row down the side. Each evening, the candle is lit and then burned down to the next date. By Christmas Day, the entire candle has melted.

For many Christians, the Christmas season reaches a climax at midnight Mass or other religious services on Christmas Eve. Churches are decorated with candles, lights, evergreen branches, and bright red poinsettias. People sing Christmas carols and listen to readings from the Gospels of Saint Luke and Saint Matthew. Priests and ministers speak to the congregations



about the coming of Christ and the need for peace and understanding among all people. The Christmas season ends on Epiphany, January 6.

In Western Christian churches, Epiphany celebrates the coming of the Wise Men to the Christ child.

Among Eastern Christians, this day celebrates Jesus' baptism. Epiphany falls on the 12th day after Christmas.

The song "Twelve Days of Christmas" refers to the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany.

### *Here is the story of each candle and what it symbolizes.*

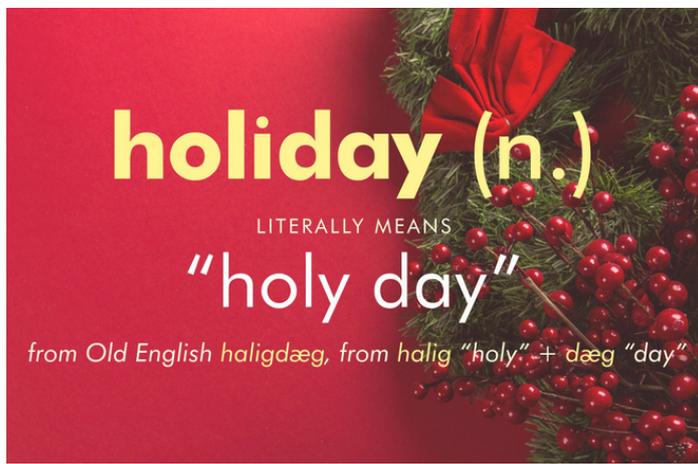
The *first candle symbolizes hope and is called the "Prophet's Candle."* The prophets of the Old Testament, especially Isaiah, waited in hope for the Messiah's arrival. The purple color symbolizes royalty, repentance, and fasting.

The *second candle represents faith and is called "Bethlehem's Candle."* Micah had foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which is also the birthplace of King David. The second candle is also purple to symbolism preparation for the coming king.

The *third candle symbolizes joy and is called the "Shepherd's Candle."* To the shepherd's great joy, the angels announced that Jesus came for humble, unimportant people like them, too. In liturgy, the color rose signifies joy. This candle is colored pink to represent joyfulness and rejoicing.

The *fourth candle represents peace and is called the "Angel's Candle."* The angels announced that Jesus came to bring peace--He came to bring people close to God and to each other again. This color is also purple to represent the culmination of love through the Messiah.

The *fifth candle represents light and purity and is called "Christ's Candle."* It is placed in the middle and is lit on Christmas Day. This candle is white to represent pure light and victory.



**F**or those who, for whatever reason, would prefer to say "Happy Holidays" in an attempt to avoid saying "Merry Christmas," I would like to visit the etymology of the word 'holiday'. The word 'holiday' was first recorded in English around the year 950, and based on the Oxford

English Dictionary, it looked a lot different back then.

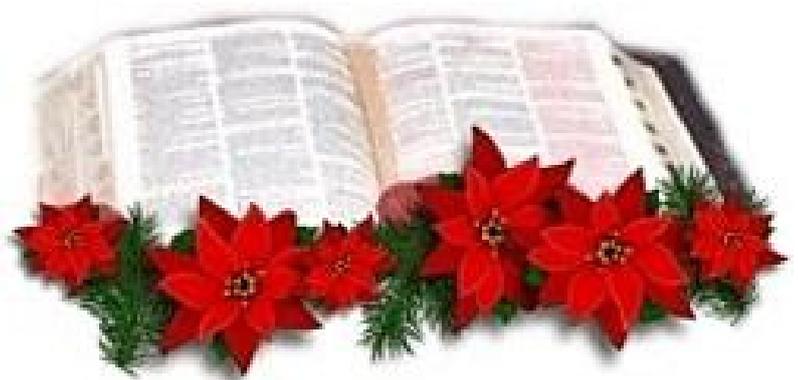
The word 'holiday' (n.) earlier written as 'haliday' (c. 1200), comes from Old English 'hāligdæg' (hālig=holy + dæg=day), meaning a consecrated day, religious anniversary or Sabbath.

See that? 'Holiday' is an amalgam of HOLY DAY. So, if you truly want to avoid Jesus Christ and the fact that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, then perhaps you should start saying "Seasons Greetings."

*"But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord."* Joshua 24:15

As the Scripture says, 'but as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord', we do, and we say Merry Christmas!

holiday  
hol y day





**H**anukkah is the Jewish Feast of Lights or Feast of Dedication. It can also be known as Feast of the Maccabees or the Festival of Lights. The Hebrew word 'hanukkah' (also written Hannuka or Chanukah) means 'dedication'.

The Hanukkah holiday begins on the eve of the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev (approximately sometime in December) and lasts eight days.

The holiday originated from the three-year struggle of Judah the Maccabbe and his followers to reclaim the temple in 165 B.C. In 168 B.C. Syrian King Antiochus IV had defiled the temple by having it dedicated to the worship of the pagan god Zeus Olympius and an altar to Zeus was set up on the high altar.

After Judah and his followers reclaimed the temple, it was cleansed and prepared for re-dedication. When the sacred temple Menorah (candelabra) was re-lit, there was only enough sacred oil to burn for one day. Yet, the oil miraculously lasted eight days until more purified oil could be found.

About 250 years after these events, the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote his account of the origins of the holiday. Josephus referred to the holiday as the Festival of Lights and not as Hanukkah. Josephus seems to be connecting the newfound liberty that resulted from the events with the image of light, and the holiday is still often referred to by the title Josephus gave it.

A lesser known story from the Apocrypha tells of the beautiful widow Judith who plied enemy Assyrian General Holofernes with cheese and wine until he fell into a drunken stupor. Judith beheaded the general in his sleep, and his soldiers fled in fear, thus saving her people from the Assyrians.

During Hanukkah, gifts are exchanged and contributions made to the poor. On the first evening, one candle is lighted in a special eight-branched candelabra called a menorah or hanukkiyah. A blessing is said each night as



the Hanukkah candles are lit.

Beginning on the second night, one candle is added every night until the total reaches eight on the last night. The candles are lighted by a ninth, separate candle called a shamash.

The celebration of Hanukkah includes a variety of religious and nonreligious

customs. Like Purim, Hanukkah is a joyous festival that lacks the work restrictions characteristic of the major festivals of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Observances are also characterized by the daily reading of Scripture, recitation of some of the Psalms, almsgiving, and singing of a special hymn. The Scroll of Antiochus, an early medieval account of Hanukkah, is read in some synagogues and homes.

In contemporary Israel, Hanukkah is a national holiday, and students present plays, sing holiday songs, and have parties. Schools are closed, and menorahs are displayed atop such prominent buildings as the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. A highlight of the eight-day festival is an annual relay from Modi'in to Jerusalem. Runners carry burning torches through the streets, beginning in Modi'in. The runners continue until the final torchbearer arrives at the Western Wall, which is the last remnant of the Temple. The torchbearer hands the torch to the chief rabbi, who uses it to light the first candle of a giant menorah.

The traditional foods during the Hanukkah holiday are symbolic of the events being celebrated. Most are fried in oil, symbolic of the oil that lasted eight days. Loukoumades are deep-fried puffs dipped in honey or sugar to represent the cakes the Maccabees ate. Pancakes are a traditional dish, serving as a reminder of the food hurriedly prepared for the Maccabees as they went into battle, along with the oil they are fried in as a reminder of the miraculous oil.

Latkes were originally symbolic of the cheesecakes served by the widow Judith, and later evolved to the potato/vegetable fried latkes most known today. Many cheese and dairy dishes are consumed in memory of brave Judith. A newer tradition in the United States is the baking of butter cookies or pretzels in the shape of Hanukkah symbols while relating the stories.

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The traditional colors of Christmas are green and red. Green represents the continuance of life through the winter and the Christian belief in eternal life through Christ. Red symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed at His Crucifixion. Christmas decorations that feature these

colors include the Christmas tree, holly, mistletoe, poinsettia and wreaths.

### **The Tree**

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition as we know it today. Decorating evergreen trees had always been a part of the German winter solstice tradition. It is a widely held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree.

Walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

The first 'Christmas trees' explicitly decorated and named after the Christian holiday, appeared in Strasbourg, in the region of Alsace, at the beginning of the 17th century. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles. After 1750, Christmas trees began showing up in other parts of Germany, and even more so after 1771, when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe visited Strasbourg and promptly included a Christmas tree in his novel, "The Suffering of Young Werther."

Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity and considered the tree a pagan symbol, referring back to ancient Egyptian and early Roman practices of decorating with evergreen boughs. Long before the advent of Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter.

Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over



their doors and windows. In many countries, it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness. The first record of a Christmas tree being on display in America was in the 1830s by the German settlers of Pennsylvania.

In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, revitalized the tree tradition, and what was done at court immediately became fashionable—not only in Britain, but with fashion-conscious East Coast American Society. By the 1890's, Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise around the U.S. In 1923, the first Christmas tree appeared on the White House South Lawn.

## **Holly**

Holly is an evergreen tree with sharply pointed, glossy leaves, a white blossom, and red berries. The use of holly as a symbolic winter decoration goes back in history to the Celtic peoples of Northern Europe, who decorated their homes with it during the time of the winter solstice, or Yule.

The early Christian Church retained many of the Celtic, as well as Roman traditions to help celebrate the birth of Christ. The needle-like points of the leaves were thought to resemble the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified. The white blossom represented His purity, and the red berries symbolized the drops of blood He shed.

## **Mistletoe**

Mistletoe is an evergreen plant with dark leaves and shiny white berries. Ancient Celtic priests considered the plant sacred and gave people sprigs of it to use as charms. It was said to have the ability to heal wounds and increase fertility. Celts hung mistletoe in their homes in order to bring themselves good luck and ward off evil spirits.

The custom of decorating homes with mistletoe probably came from its use as a ceremonial plant by early Europeans. During holidays in the Victorian era, the English would hang sprigs of mistletoe from ceilings and



in doorways. If someone was found standing under the mistletoe, they would be kissed by someone else in the room, behavior not usually demonstrated in Victorian society.

Some traditions state that a man should pluck a berry from the mistletoe whenever he kisses a woman under it's branches. When the berries are gone - no more kisses! In some places, they even burn the Christmas mistletoe on the twelfth day of Christmas; otherwise they believe that all who kissed under it will never marry.

### **Poinsettia**

In 1828, the American minister to Mexico, Joel R. Poinsett, brought a red and green plant from Mexico to America. As its coloring seemed perfect for the new holiday, the plants, which were called poinsettias after Poinsett, began appearing in greenhouses as early as 1830. In 1870, New York stores began to sell them at Christmas. By 1900, they were a universal symbol of the holiday.

### **Wreaths**

In ancient Greece, a laurel wreath was awarded to victors in sporting events. The Romans adopted this custom, hanging the wreaths outside their homes to brag of their victory. Wreaths were also used in Rome much as we use house numbers. Everyone would have their own distinctive wreath hanging on the door or outside the house to identify their family.

Much symbolism may be attached to the Christmas wreath. It is usually in the shape of a circle which represents the eternal nature of God's love. Evergreens are used to represent immortality.





**X** is the abbreviation of the name of Christ and has been in use since early Christian times. It is written in the Greek alphabet ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (cristos). The first two letters are called Chi and Rho and were used to form one of the earliest Christograms, which is a monogram or combination of

letters that forms an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ.

However, many people are mistakenly of the opinion that the use of 'Xmas' is a recent invention or a secular attempt to remove the religious tradition from Christmas by taking the 'Christ' out of the word 'Christmas'.

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (Merriam-Webster, 1994) states that, through the centuries, words like Christian, Christianity, christened, and Christopher were also written as Xtian, Xtianity, Xstened, and Xpofer. More recently we have added to this list Xbox, X-ray, Windows XP, etc.

It was once always thought that the 'mas' element in Xmas, which should really be 'mass', meant a crowd or a gathering, but this is incorrect. The word appears in Old English as 'mæsse', from Vulgar Latin 'messa' which literally translates as 'dismissal'; from Late Latin 'missa' (dismissal), fem. past participle of mittere "to let go, send", probably so called from the concluding words of the Eucharistic service, "Ite, missa est", "Go, it is the dismissal." Sometimes glossed in Old English as sendnes - 'send-ness'.

Ite, missa est were the last words of the mass until the reforms of 1962 when the words Gloria, Benedicamus Domino was said instead. Lutherans continue to use "ite, missa est" in the Divine Office and at the end of their Divine Service.

The photo on the following page is the Chi-Rho page from the Book of Lindisfarne, an Irish monastic foundation (c. AD 634) on a tidal island off the north east coast of England also known just as Holy Island. Note the distinctive long left leg on the Chi/X which is a style found also in the Book of Kells, Book of Durrow, St. Gallen Gospel Book, MacDurnan Gospels, the St. Gall Gospels and many more.



Within the image is the text in the Latin Vulgate. The verse is "Christi (XPI) autem generatio sic erat cum esset desponsata mater eius Maria Ioseph" which translates to "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph".

So, as believers we should feel free to write "Merry Xmas" and know we're not making a secular abbreviation or that we're not removing Christ from Christmas, because Christ IS Christmas!





The word 'carol' is derived from the old French word 'caroller', which means dancing around in a circle. It was derived from the Latin 'choraula', which in turn was derived from the Greek 'choraules'. Choraules was also translated as a Greek dance called a 'choraulein', which means 'to dance to

a flute'. The dance later spread throughout Europe and became especially popular with the French, who replaced the flute music with singing.

Originally, a Christmas carol referred to a piece of vocal music in carol form whose lyrics center on the theme of Christmas or the Christmas season. The difference between a Christmas carol and a Christmas popular song can often be unclear as they are both sung by groups of people going house to house during the Christmas season. Some view Christmas carols to be only religious in nature and consider Christmas songs to be secular.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with bringing carols into the formal worship of the church during a Christmas Midnight Mass in a cave in Greccio, in the province of Umbria in 1223. As patron of the arts, he inspired the composers and poets of the day to deliver Christmas music.

The lighter joyous Christmas songs were introduced many years later in Renaissance Italy in the 1400's. The earliest known copies of English carols were part of the Ritson Manuscript about 1410 and is so named as the manuscript was later owned by Joseph Ritson, who in 1795 gave it to the British Museum. The 44 composers of most of these early carols are unknown.

Throughout the years, monks also contributed significantly in composing music themes from the Bible. By the 1600's, carols involved singing only, and Christmas had become the main holiday for these songs. In 1649, John de Brebeur wrote the first American Christmas carol, called "Jesus is Born". In 1660, Christmas carols became far removed from the monastic and courtly types of the carols of earlier times. They were sung by ordinary people, in their homes, and the words of the carols were printed and circulated on broadsheets.



From 1558 until 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not allowed to practice their faith openly. Someone during that era wrote, what we know as the "Twelve Days of Christmas", was a catechism song for young Catholics. It has two levels of meaning; the surface meaning, which celebrated the twelve days of

Christmas ending with Epiphany, plus a hidden meaning known only to members of the church. Each element in the carol has a code word for a religious reality, which the children could remember.

1. The partridge in a pear tree was Jesus Christ.
2. Two turtledoves were the Old and New Testaments.
3. Three French hens stood for faith, hope and love.
4. The four calling birds were the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
5. The five golden rings recalled the Torah or Law, the first five books of the Old Testament.
6. The six geese a-laying stood for the six days of creation.
7. Seven swans a-swimming represented the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit: Prophecy, Serving, Teaching, Exhortation, Contribution, Leadership, and Mercy.
8. The eight maids a-milking were the eight beatitudes.
9. Nine ladies dancing were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control.
10. The ten lords a-leaping were the Ten Commandments.
11. Eleven pipers piping stood for the eleven faithful disciples.
12. Twelve drummers drumming symbolized the twelve points of belief in the Apostles' Creed.

Most of the carols sung today were originally composed in the 1700's and 1800's. "O Holy Night" was introduced at midnight Mass in 1847. Adolphe Adam, a French composer, wrote the music. "It Came Upon The Midnight Clear" was written in 1849 by Edmund Hamilton Sears. The score was provided the next year by Richard Storrs Willis, a New York organist.

In 1865, after a trip to the Holy Land, Rector Phillips Brooks wrote the



words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Three years later, Lewis Redner wrote the score. The words of the famous carol "Silent Night" were written on Christmas Eve in 1818 by Joseph Mohr, an Austrian priest. Franz Gruber, the organist of Mohr's church, composed the music that same night, and the carol was

sung at midnight Mass.

Christmas carols today are not necessarily relics of the past, as contemporary composers and poets continue to write new carols to challenge the popularity of those classic songs that instantly remind us of Christmas.

Today, many caroling groups sing for charity in churches and neighborhoods. Some historical accounts claim this is rooted in feudal societies, when poor citizens would 'sing for their supper' in exchange for food or drink. Another theory is that carolers traveled door-to-door because they were not originally allowed to perform in churches.

The most believable account of the origins of Christmas caroling by ordinary people takes place in England in the 1840's. After Prince Albert of Germany married Victoria of England, the English peasants were eager to please and impress the newly married royal family. After reading in a newspaper that Prince Albert thoroughly enjoyed Christmas carols, the peasants starting serenading him with them.

Caroling has been a tradition ever since. It is said that the Methodists and Lutherans brought a modified version of this tradition to America. The American tradition of caroling involves traveling carolers being offered food and drinks after being welcomed into the homes that they were serenading. The rich and interesting history of Christmas carols has brought a beautiful element to Christmas celebrations throughout the world. From medieval dancing songs to the 19th-century revival, the words and music of carols have evolved over time as each generation of carol singers continues to add to a mixed tradition of folk music and sacred song.



The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back to a monk named St. Nicholas. It is believed that Nicholas was born sometime around 280 A.D. in Patara, near Myra in modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many

legends. It is said that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick.

In a well known story illustrating St. Nicholas' benevolence, we find two of the basic principles of the holiday spirit - giving to others and helping the less fortunate.

According to this legend, there were three Italian maidens whose families had fallen on hard times. Because their father could not afford the dowries necessary for them to marry, he was considering selling one of his daughters into slavery to get dowries for the other two. When the good saint heard of the family's plight, he went to their home late one night and anonymously tossed three bags of gold down the chimney. Miraculously, a bag fell into each of the sisters stockings, which were hanging by the fire to dry. His kindhearted gift made it possible for all three sisters to marry.

Many years after his death, Nicholas was made a saint. In time, he became the patron saint of children. The date of his death, December 6, was commemorated with an annual feast, which gradually came to mark the beginning of the medieval Christmas season. On the night before, children put out their shoes and hang up their stockings. Early next morning, they rush to see what gifts Saint Nicholas left them.

After the Protestant Reformation, the veneration of saints began to be discouraged, but St. Nicholas maintained a positive reputation. And, people had become accustomed to the annual visit from their gift-giving saint and didn't want to forget the purpose of the holiday. So in some countries, the festivities of St. Nicholas' Day were merged with Christmas celebrations, and although the gift-bearer took on new, non-religious forms, he still reflected the saint's generous spirit.



In the 1600's, the Dutch presented Sinterklaas (meaning St. Nicholas) to the colonies. In their excitement, many English-speaking children uttered the name so quickly that Sinterklaas sounded like Santy Claus. After years of mispronunciation, the name evolved into Santa Claus. In Germany, he appeared as

Weihnachtsmann, in England as Father Christmas, and in France, as Père Noël, who left small gifts in the children's shoes.

In 1808, American author Washington Irving created a new version of old St. Nick. This one rode over the treetops in a horse drawn wagon dropping gifts down the chimneys of his favorites. In his satire, "History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty," Irving described Santa as a jolly Dutchman who smoked a long stemmed clay pipe and wore baggy breeches and a broad brimmed hat. Also, the familiar phrase, ". . . laying his finger beside his nose . . .," first appeared in Irving's story.

That phrase was used again in 1822 in the now-classic poem by Dr. Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas". His verse gave an Arctic flavor to Santa's image when he substituted eight tiny reindeer and a sleigh for Irving's horse and wagon. It is Moore's description of Santa that we most often think of today, "He had a broad face, and a little round belly, that shook, when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly."

Up to this point, Santa's physical appearance and the color of his suit were open to individual interpretation. Then in 1863, Thomas Nast, a German immigrant, gave us a visual image of the cheerful giver that was to later become widely accepted.

When Nast was asked to illustrate Moore's charming verse for a book of children's poems, he gave us a softer, kinder Santa who was still old but appeared less stern than the ecclesiastical St. Nicholas. He dressed his elf in figure in red and endowed him with human characteristics. Most important of all, Nast gave Santa a home at the North Pole. For twenty-three years, his annual drawings in Harpers Weekly magazine allowed



Americans to peek into the magical world of Santa Claus and set the stage for the shaping of today's merry gentleman.

Artist Haddon Sundblom added the final touches to Santa's modern image. Beginning in 1931, his billboard and other advertisements for Coca Cola featured a portly, grandfatherly Santa with human proportions and a ruddy complexion. Sunblom's exuberant, twinkle-eyed Santa firmly fixed the gift-giver's image in the public mind.

St. Nicholas' evolution into today's happy, larger-than-life Santa Claus is a wonderful example of the blending of countless beliefs and practices from around the world. This benevolent figure encompasses all the goodness and innocence of childhood. And because goodness is his very essence, in every kindness we do, Santa will always be remembered.



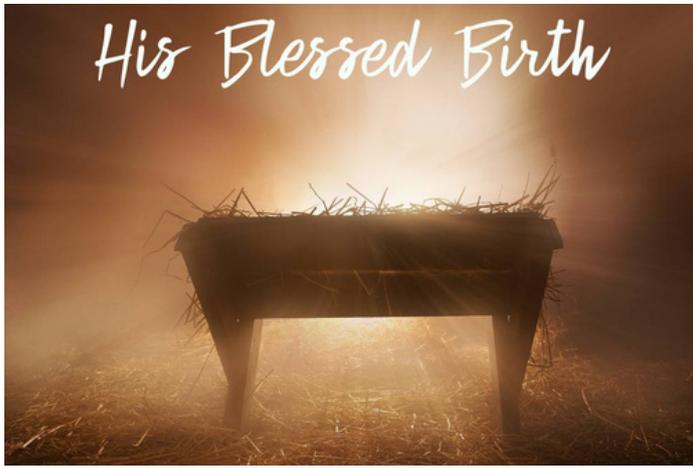
Thomas Nast image from 1880



Image from Coca Cola ad in 1931

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## His Blessed Birth



As a believer in the miraculous and Holy Birth of Jesus Christ, I am usually amused by the statements of non-believers who like to challenge the celebration of Christmas.

Beaming with self-knowledge, they proudly put forth questions that really are statements, "Ya know . . . Christmas is really a pagan holiday?" Or, "Ya know . . . they just picked December 25th as the date?" These statements are usually delivered with a tone of dismissal; with the intent to contradict or discredit the blessed event.

Christians are well aware of the true origin of Christmas. We acknowledge that the actual birthdate of Christ is not known. However, this does not negate our belief.

We also know that Christmas is not a pagan holiday. There have been seasons; spring, summer, fall, and winter, since God first created the heavens and the earth. And, there were many seasons that came to pass before the birth of Christ. And, seasonal pagan traditions were indeed abundant in the days prior to His birth. And, they continue to this day. However, these observances serve the purpose to worship their own (false) gods, planets, and the passing of seasons.

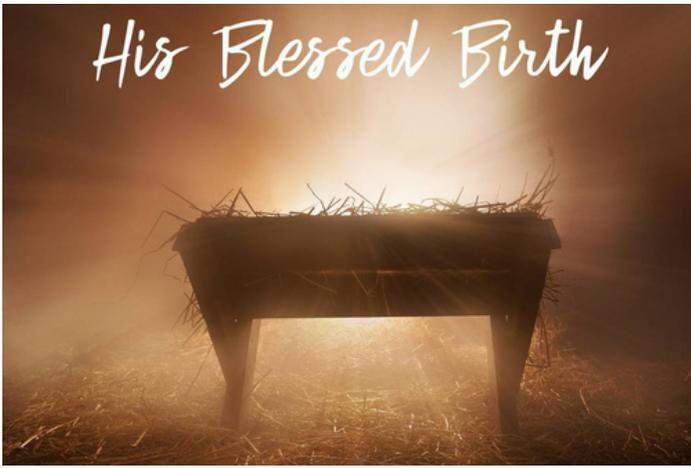
For example, in ancient pagan times, the last day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere was celebrated as the night that the Great Mother Goddess gives birth to the baby Sun God. It is also called Yule, the day a huge log is added to a bonfire, around which everyone would dance and sing to awaken the sun from its long winter sleep.

In Roman times, it became the celebrations honoring Saturnus (the harvest god) and Mithras (the ancient god of light), a form of sun worship that had come to Rome from Syria a century before with the cult of Sol Invictus. It announced that winter is not forever, that life continues, and an invitation to stay in good spirit. The first day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere occurs between the 20th and 22nd of December. The Romans celebrated Saturnalia between December 17th and the 24th.

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## *His Blessed Birth*



To avoid persecution during the Roman pagan festival, early Christians decked their homes with Saturnalia holly. However, as Christian numbers increased and their customs prevailed, the celebrations took on a Christian observance.

But the early church actually did not celebrate the birth of Christ in December until Telesphorus, who was the second Bishop of Rome from 125 to 136 A.D., declared that church services should be held during this time to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord and Savior.

However, since no one was quite sure in which month Christ was born, Nativity was often held in September, which was during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets (modern-day Rosh Hashanah). In fact, for more than 300 years, people observed the birth of Jesus on various dates.

In the year 274 A.D., the winter solstice fell on December 25th. Roman Emperor Aurelian proclaimed the date as "Natalis Solis Invicti," the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. In 320 A.D., Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ.

In 325 A.D., Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, introduced Christmas as an immovable feast on December 25th. He also introduced Sunday as a holy day in a new 7-day week, and introduced movable feasts (Easter). In 354 A.D., Bishop Liberius of Rome officially ordered his members to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th, as well.

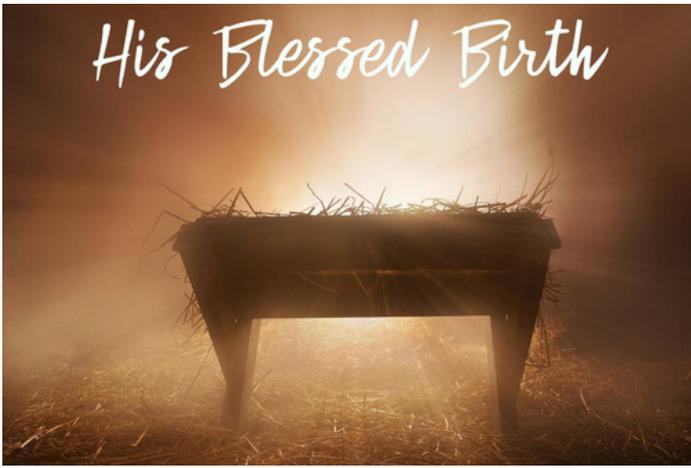
However, even though Constantine declared December 25th as the birthday of Christ, Christians, recognizing the date as a pagan festival, and did not share in the emperor's good intentions.

Christmas failed to gain universal recognition among Christians until recently. In England, Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas festivities between 1649 and 1660 through the so-called Blue Laws, believing that Christmas should be a solemn day. When many Protestants escaped persecution by fleeing to the colonies all over the world, interest in joyous Christmas

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## His Blessed Birth



celebrations was rekindled. Still, Christmas was not even a legal holiday until the 1800's. The popularity of a Christmas celebration was spurred on in 1820 by Washington Irving's book "The Keeping of Christmas at Bracebridge Hall."

In 1834, Britain's Queen Victoria brought her German husband, Prince Albert, into Windsor Castle, introducing the tradition of the Christmas tree and carols that were held in Europe to the British Empire.

A week before Christmas in 1834, Charles Dickens published "A Christmas Carol," in which he wrote that Scrooge required Cratchit to work, and that the U.S. Congress met on Christmas Day. It was so popular that neither the churches nor the governments could not ignore the importance of Christmas celebrations. In 1836, Alabama became the first state in the U.S. to declare Christmas a legal holiday. In 1907, Oklahoma became the last U.S. state to declare Christmas a legal holiday.

As believers, we can respond to those statements posed by non-believers that Christmas is not a pagan holiday. The truth is that some pagan traditions continue to be reflected in the Christian celebration. Christmas celebrations end the 12th day of Christmas (January 6th), the same amount of days that the return of the sun was celebrated by ancient and Roman pagans.

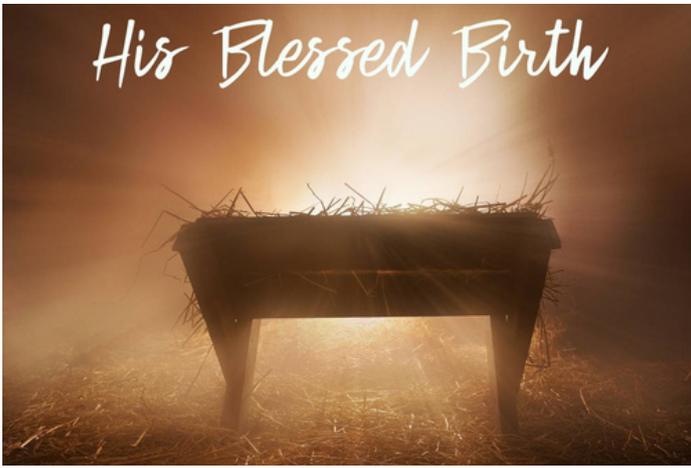
There are also early pagan tree and wreath symbolisms. However, early Christians under persecution for their faith, took a page from today and made 'lemonade from lemons"! They took many of those pagan traditions foisted upon them, and gave them a holy symbolism or seasonal date for their belief in Christ's birth.

Since no one knows the day of His birth, the Roman Catholic Church felt free to choose the 25th of December. The church wished to replace the pagan festival with a Christian holy day. The psychology was that it would be easier to take away an unholy (but traditional) festival from the population if they replaced it with a good one. Otherwise, the church would have left a void where there was a long-standing tradition and risked

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## His Blessed Birth



producing a discontented population and a rapid return to the old ways.

As believers, we are not as concerned with every grain of detail, as we are the actual event. We celebrate the Blessed Birth that took place, not the exact day or moment in time.

Among Christians, His birth is celebrated every day. We call on His name in daily prayer and worship. When He abides in our hearts, remembrance of His blessed First Coming can be done on any day of the calendar and at any movement of the clock.

This Christmas, may we all take the time to re-read the story of Christ's birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to always remember and joyfully celebrate the Birth of our King!

*“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Luke 2:4-7*

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).” Matthew 1:22*

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6*

*“If you trust me, you really are trusting God who sent me. I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the darkness.” John 12:44,46*

*“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:11*

*“Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable Gift.” 2 Corinthians 9:15*

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**E**piphany, also known as “Three King's Day” or the “Twelfth Day” (or “Twelfth Night”) is celebrated in the United States on January 6. The word 'epiphany' comes from Greek and means 'manifestation'. The Christian feast celebrates the revelation of God to man (a theophany) and the

presence of God as Jesus Christ in human history.

In Western Christianity, the feast commemorates the Gospel of Matthew, according to which the Magi (the Three Wise Men) from the East went to Bethlehem to worship Jesus Christ, arriving twelve days after His birth.

The three wise men - named Melchior, representing Europe; Caspar, representing Arabia; and Balthazar, representing Africa - followed the star of Bethlehem across the desert to meet the baby Jesus, offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts were symbolic of the importance of Jesus' birth, the gold representing his royal standing; frankincense his divine birth; and myrrh his mortality.

Festivities for the ancient Christian feast day vary around the world, from swimming in icy waters to exchanging presents, fireworks and parades. In many countries the day is a public holiday. Hundreds of years ago, roast lamb was traditionally served at Epiphany in honor of Christ and the three Kings' visit. In some European countries, children leave their shoes out the night before to be filled with gifts, while others leave straw for the three Kings' camels.

Although it is not a public holiday in the United States, many Christians take part in Epiphany activities such as star processions at church and parties or get-togethers to clean up homes after the festive season.

*“The star appeared to them, guiding them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”* Matthew 2:9a-11



## **A Christmas Prayer**

*by Robert Louis Stevenson*

**Loving Father,  
help us remember the birth of Jesus,  
that we may share in the song of the angels,  
the gladness of the shepherds,  
and worship of the wise men.**

**Close the door of hate  
and open the door of love all over the world.  
Let kindness come with every gift  
and good desires with every greeting.**

**Deliver us from evil by the blessing  
which Christ brings,  
and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.**

**May the Christmas morning  
make us happy to be thy children,  
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds  
with grateful thoughts,  
forgiving and forgiven,  
for Jesus' sake.**

**Amen**