

A History of December Traditions

2009: Blessings and Merry Christmas

"We should proudly celebrate our traditions and embrace our deeply held religious beliefs especially at this time of year when we remember the birth of Jesus the Christ. What follows is certainly not the final factual word on the history or origins of our traditions. However, may it serve to remind us that there is wonderful diversity among men. A diversity which must be respected if we are to live in the Spirit of Christ's message. Often I hear well meaning Christians complain about the commercialization of the Christmas holiday. Ironically it has been secular commercialization which is responsible for the standardization of modern Christmas tradition.

Let us remember that December 25th is the day Christians have *chosen* to celebrate His birth and to remember the Spirit of His message. Historians now believe He was born in the Spring of 3BC. It is no accident that this chosen day falls close to the Winter Solstice celebrated by people since the beginning of time in various ways as the return of the Sun. His living example, according to New Testament scriptures, was to treat all people kindly and with respect. He taught about Love without conditions. He encouraged others to see their mistakes and to do better. He did not condemn the beliefs or traditions of others. However, He did rail against religious leaders who practiced an exclusive religion and who were so absorbed by the *letter of the law* as to be blind to the *Spirit of the Law*.

Nor did He convert anyone he encountered to Judaism. Often Christians forget that Yeshu (Jesus) was not a Christian. Is it not clear that we must look beyond the literal for the true Spirit of the message when even His name did not survive multiple generations of translation. And often we ignore the fact that the roots of Christianity go back to the formation of the Roman church. The consensus of scripture selection to form the Bible and the resulting core beliefs of Christianity were influenced by the political and practical need of a Pagan Roman emperor to have a consistent practice of Christianity throughout the far reaches of his empire. The Romans have a long successful history of co-opting religious practice by melding aspects of the conquered religion into the State religion. We must not confuse the teachings of Yeshu with the conclusions of the Council of Nicaea. We must follow His teachings and form our own conclusions with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Remember that His message was about the God of Love. The scriptures are full of contradictions that can divert us from the true Spirit of His message. Let us always question the validity of scriptures describing a jealous, wrathful, punishing god of war and one that promotes discrimination and condemnation of some groups. We must ask the question; Is God really this horrible or is our understanding of God simply too limited and incomplete? I believe God is perfect therefore any shortcomings must be mine.

Let us embrace the Spirit of His message this Christmas season in full knowledge that there is not just one way to do so. And that Truth is not determined by a majority vote. A large number may worship the same as we but this does not make it the *only* way.

May the Blessings of Christ and the Spirit of His message fill you now and always."

Rev. Thomas Janssen

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Christmas

From the Old English 'Cristes Mæsse' ~ meaning the 'mass of Christ' ~ the story of Christmas begins with the birth of a babe in Bethlehem.

It is believed that Christ was born on the 25th, although the exact month is unknown. December was likely chosen so the Catholic Church could compete with rival pagan rituals held at that time of year and because of its closeness with the winter solstice in the Northern hemisphere, a traditional time of celebration among many ancient cultures.

Luke, Chapter Two

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:;) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

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 Savior, 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."

Hanukkah

Commencing on the 25th day of the Hebrew month Kislev, Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday commemorating the re-dedication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the Syrians.

In 168 BC, members of the Jewish family Maccabee led a revolt against the Greek Syrians due to the policies of Syrian King Antiochus IV which were aimed at nullifying the Jewish faith. Part of this stratagem included changing the *Beit HaMikdash* - the Holy Temple in Jerusalem - to a Greek temple complete with idolatry. Led by Judah Maccabee, the Jews won victory over the Syrians in 165 BC and reclaimed their temple.

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After cleansing the temple and preparing for its re-dedication, it was found there was not enough oil to light the *N'er Tamid*, an oil lamp present in Jewish houses of worship which represents eternal light. Once lit, the lamp should never be extinguished.

A search of the temple produced a small vial of undefiled oil -- enough for only one day. Miraculously, the Temple lights burned for eight days until a new supply of oil was brought. In remembrance of this miracle, one candle of the *Menorah* - an eight branched candelabra - is lit each of the eight days of Hanukkah. Hanukkah, which means *dedication*, is a Hebrew word when translated is commonly spelled *Hanukah*, *Chanukah*, and *Hanukkah* due to different translations and customs.

The tradition of receiving gifts on each of the eight days of Hanukkah is relatively new and due in part to the celebration's proximity to the Christmas season.

Santa Claus

The origin of Santa Claus begins in the 4th century with Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, an area in present day Turkey. By all accounts St. Nicholas was a generous man, particularly devoted to children. After his death around 340 A.D. he was buried in Myra, but in 1087 Italian sailors purportedly stole his remains and removed them to Bari, Italy, greatly increasing St. Nicholas' popularity throughout Europe.

His kindness and reputation for generosity gave rise to claims he that he could perform miracles and devotion to him increased. St. Nicholas became the patron saint of Russia, where he was known by his red cape, flowing white beard, and bishop's mitre.

In Greece, he is the patron saint of sailors, in France he was the patron of lawyers, and in Belgium the patron of children and travelers. Thousands of churches across Europe were dedicated to him and some time around the 12th century an official church holiday was created in his honor. The Feast of St. Nicholas was celebrated December 6 and the day was marked by gift-giving and charity.

After the Reformation, European followers of St. Nicholas dwindled, but the legend was kept alive in Holland where the Dutch spelling of his name Sint Nikolaas was eventually transformed to Sinterklaas. Dutch children would leave their wooden shoes by the fireplace, and Sinterklaas would reward good children by placing treats in their shoes. Dutch colonists brought brought this tradition with them to America in the 17th century and here the Anglican name of Santa Claus emerged.

In 1822 Clement C. Moore composed the poem *[A Visit From Saint Nicholas](#)*, published as *The Night Before Christmas* as a gift for his children. In it, he portrays Santa Claus:

*He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly,
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.*

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Other countries feature different gift-bearers for the Christmas or Advent season:

- La Befana in Italy
- The Three Kings in Spain, Puerto Rico, and Mexico
- Christkindl or the Christ Child in Switzerland and Austria
- Father Christmas in England
- Pere Noël, Father Christmas or the Christ Child in France.

Still, the figure of Santa Claus as a jolly, benevolent, plump man in a red suit described in Moore's poem remains with us today and is recognized by children and adults alike around the world.

Christmas Trees

In 16th-century Germany fir trees were decorated, both indoors and out, with apples, roses, gilded candies, and colored paper. In the Middle Ages, a popular religious play depicted the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

A fir tree hung with apples was used to symbolize the Garden of Eden -- the Paradise Tree. The play ended with the prophecy of a savior coming, and so was often performed during the Advent season.

It is held that Protestant reformer Martin Luther first adorned trees with light. While coming home one December evening, the beauty of the stars shining through the branches of a fir inspired him to recreate the effect by placing candles on the branches of a small fir tree inside his home

The Christmas Tree was brought to England by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert from his native Germany. The famous *Illustrated News* etching in 1848, featuring the Royal Family of Victoria, Albert and their children gathered around a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle, popularized the tree throughout Victorian England. Brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans, the Christmas tree became [an American tradition] by the late 19th century.

Christmas Trees – US Tradition

The variations of the Christmas traditions of USA equal the number active cultures that have settled in the land. These cultural contributions were given a new lease of life by creative artists, authors, poets and songwriters, and it was melded together by the power of secular and commercialized media in record companies, radio stations, television, cinemas and now the internet. The unwritten law of media is the presentation of a seemingly uniform celebration of the Christmas traditions of USA. This is responsible for the world wide acceptance of a universal Christmas image which they get from the media. Nevertheless, the celebrations are peculiar to each region.

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Christmas Stockings

According to legend, a kindly nobleman grew despondent over the death of his beloved wife and foolishly squandered his fortune. This left his three young daughters without dowries and thus facing a life of spinsterhood.

The generous St. Nicholas, hearing of the girls' plight, set forth to help. Wishing to remain anonymous, he rode his white horse by the nobleman's house and threw three small pouches of gold coins down the chimney where they were fortuitously captured by the stockings the young women had hung by the fireplace to dry.

Mistletoe

Mistletoe was used by Druid priests 200 years before the birth of Christ in their winter celebrations. They revered the plant since it had no roots yet remained green during the cold months of winter.

The ancient Celts believed mistletoe to have magical healing powers and used it as an antidote for poison, infertility, and to ward off evil spirits. The plant was also seen as a symbol of peace, and it is said that among Romans, enemies who met under mistletoe would lay down their weapons and embrace.

Scandinavians associated the plant with Frigga, their goddess of love, and it may be from this that we derive the custom of kissing under the mistletoe. Those who kissed under the mistletoe had the promise of happiness and good luck in the following year.

Holly, Ivy and Greenery

In Northern Europe Christmas occurred during the middle of winter, when ghosts and demons could be heard howling in the winter winds. Boughs of holly, believed to have magical powers since they remained green through the harsh winter, were often placed over the doors of homes to drive evil away. Greenery was also brought indoors to freshen the air and brighten the mood during the long, dreary winter.

Legend also has it that holly sprang from the footsteps of Christ as he walked the earth. The pointed leaves were said to represent the crown of thorns Christ wore while on the cross and the red berries symbolized the blood he shed.

Poinsettias

A native Mexican plant, poinsettias were named after Joel R. Poinsett, U.S. ambassador to Mexico who brought the plant to America in 1828. Poinsettias were likely used by Mexican Franciscans in their 17th century Christmas celebrations. One legend has it that a young Mexican boy, on his way to visit the village Nativity scene, realized he had no gift for the Christ child. He gathered pretty green branches from along the road and brought them to the church. Though the other children mocked him, when the leaves were laid at the manger, a beautiful star-shaped flower appeared on each branch. The bright red petals, often mistaken for flowers, are actually the upper leaves of the plant.

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Kwanzaa

Doctor Maulana Karenga, a Professor at California State University in Long Beach, California, created Kwanzaa in 1966. It is a holiday celebrated by millions of African-Americans around the world, encouraging them to remember their African heritage and consider their current place in America today. Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26 to January 1 and involves seven principles called *Nguzo Saba*:

- Umoja (Unity)
- Kujichagulia (Self-determination)
- Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)
- Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)
- Nia (Purpose)
- Kuumba (Creativity)
- Imani (Faith).

In the Kwanzaa ritual, seven candles called *Mishumaa Saba* are placed in a *Kinara*, or candle holder, which is then set upon the *Mikeka*, a mat usually made of straw.

Three green candles are placed on the left, three red candles on the right and a black candle in the center, each candle representing one of the seven principles of the celebration. One candle is lit each day of the Kwanzaa celebration, beginning from left to right. The colors of Kwanzaa ~ black, red and green ~ also have a special significance. Black symbolizes the faces of the African people, Red symbolizes the blood they have shed, and Green represents hope and the color of the motherland. The name itself - Kwanzaa - is a Swahili word meaning "fruits of the harvest."

[“How different a tradition looks when we it is so new and we can clearly see its origins. How much more skeptical are we about new practices? Let a few centuries roll by and the tradition takes on higher authority. We really must each become responsible for that which we embrace as well as that which we reject. The *test of time* is still ongoing. Traditions and beliefs that stick around a long time do carry greater validity. However, the time of testing does not end – not ever.”]