

# **Hanging of the Greens**

## **The Christmas Tree**

Today, the Christmas tree is the center of our festivities. Glittering with lights and ornaments, it is a part of the beauty and meaning of Christmas. There are several legends and stories about the Christmas tree.

The first use of the Christmas tree was in the medieval German Paradise Plays, held outdoors and portraying the creation of humankind. The Tree of Life was a fir tree decorated with apples. Later other ornaments were hung upon them, such as paper flowers and gilded nuts. In England branches or whole trees were forced into bloom indoors for Christmas. From these beginnings the use of a tree at Christmas was established. Martin Luther was perhaps the first to use a lighted tree.

The story is told that on one Christmas Eve Martin Luther wandered outdoors and became enraptured with the beauty of the starry sky. Its brilliance and loveliness led him to reflect on the glory of the first Christmas Eve as seen in Bethlehem's radiant skies. Wishing to share with his wife and children the enchantment he had felt, he cut from the forest an evergreen, glistening with snow, and took it home. He placed upon it candles to represent the glorious heavens he had seen. The use of a candle-lighted tree spread to all Europe, then America came to regard it as the central ornament of Christmas.

## **The Evergreens**

The most striking and the most universal feature of Christmas is the use of evergreens in churches and homes. Among ancient Romans evergreens were an emblem of peace, joy, and victory. The early Christians placed them in their windows to indicate that Christ had entered the home. Holly and ivy, along with pine, and fir are called evergreens because they never change color. They are ever-green, ever - alive, even in the midst of winter. They symbolize the unchanging nature of our God, and they remind us of the everlasting life that is ours through Christ Jesus.

Under Christian thought and sentiment, holly became widely used in church celebrations. Holly was considered as the burning bush, or a symbol of Mary whose being glows with the Holy Spirit. The red berries represented the blood drops from the cruel thorns in the crown of Jesus.

In Isaiah 60:13 we find these words: "The Glory of Lebanon shall come unto you, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of your sanctuary."

Our forefathers called the procuring of these evergreens, "Bringing home Christmas!"

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## Christmas Cookies

Why do we eat cookies for Christmas? For lots of people, it's not Christmas without cookies. We spend weeks baking and decorating our cookies, and there's always a cookie plate at any party. But how did cookies come to be such an important symbol of Christmas?

### **CUT-OUT COOKIES**

In the more recent history of Christmas cookies, cut-out cookies are now almost universally associated with the holidays in the US. We can trace these cookies back to mumming, a Christmas tradition in colonial areas where the Church of England was influential. In mumming, Christmas stories were acted out and food was used to help depict the stories. Yule dows were cut-outs made in this tradition, often in the shape of the baby Jesus.

In the 1800s, Pennsylvania Dutch children created large cut out cookies as window decorations. Around this same time, Yule dows became popular again and were called Yule dollies. They were made with tin cutters and shaped like people, elaborately decorated with icing (like today's gingerbread men). The face was always made out of a scrap of paper cut out of magazines, which had to be removed before the cookie was eaten.

### **COOKIES FOR SANTA**

Ever wondered why jolly ole Santa is left cookies to fuel him on his one-night journey? Historians believe the tradition began during the Great Depression, as a way for parents to encourage generosity in their children. The tradition stuck, and Santa isn't in danger of needing a smaller suit any time soon.

## The Christmas Poinsettia

Most Christmas greenery reflects European traditions. But one colorful plant, which looks like a flaming star, the poinsettia, is a native to the American continent. It was named after Dr. Joel Robert Poinset, an ambassador to Mexico who first introduced it to the United States in 1828. The people of Mexico and Central America call the brilliant tropical plant the "Flower of the Holy Night." The Poinsettia is a many-pointed star that has become a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem.

# Hangings of the Greens

## The Paraments and Advent Colors

Both visual and performing arts have always been important ways to communicate the Christian faith. The use of music has helped believers understand their Godly hope. Other forms of visual art have been used from the beginning to help express various aspects of Christian doctrine and life.

Colors, altar paraments or coverings, and banners are some of the most important visual ways Christians have used to express their faith in worship. The objective in covering the Communion Table with cloths of various colors was to help focus the attention of worshippers on the special nature of Christ as the Perfect Sacrifice. In the early days of Christian worship, Advent and Christmas were seen as a somber time, much like Lent is today. Purple table coverings were used to speak of Christ's Kingship, but the mood was somber.

As Christians began to share their celebration of Christmas with their non-Christian neighbors they began to focus on the joy of the Christmas event. As the emphasis of Christmas began to change to one of joyful celebration the color used also changed to express Christ the King in that more happy way. While purple is still used in some churches and at certain times, many Christian churches now use blue to speak of the Kingship of Christ when the occasion is joyful. At Advent we wait with anticipation and celebration for our coming Christ. At Advent we wait with anticipation and celebration for our coming Christ... so our hearts sing out, "O Come Emmanuel!"

## The Nativity

One of the most heart-warming expressions of Christmas is the Nativity. The Nativity speaks of the mystery of God's wisdom. Why God chose to send his son into our world as a baby of humble birth, born in common surroundings, we do not know. What we do know is that God reached out to all people including the poor and wealthy, the simple and the wise, the powerless and the powerful. All who found him knelt in humility before him. Knowing God is possible because he came to us, at our level. Whenever we see a Nativity we find ourselves with Mary and Joseph; with the Shepherds, and with the Wise Men; bowing before the manger, overwhelmed by God's expression of love in coming to us.

# Hangin' of the Greens

## The Advent Wreath

Advent is a time of expectation, and this is symbolized, not only by the four-week period of preparation, but also by the lighting of an Advent Candle in an Advent Wreath on each Sunday of the season. The flame of each new candle reminds us, the worshipers, that something is happening, and something more is still to come.

The candles are arranged in a circle to remind us of the continuous power of God, which knows neither beginning nor ending. There is also symbolism in the colors of the candles. The three purple candles symbolize the coming of Christ from the royal line of David. He is coming as the King of Kings as well as the Prince of Peace. The pink candle is to be lighted on the third Sunday of the Advent season. This candle represents joy. The large white candle in the center is known as the Christ candle, and points to Jesus as the Christ, the Light of the world.

A progression is noted in the lighting of the candles of the Advent wreath each Sunday. Each candle symbolizes various aspects of our waiting experience. The culmination of the season comes as we light the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve evening worship. We join in rejoicing that the promise of long ago has been fulfilled.

## Christmas Caroling

The actual origin of caroling as a part of the Christmas celebration is really unknown. Several countries have claimed to be the birthplace of the custom. From the first, music of some kind was a part of the church festivals in honor of the birth of Jesus. We know that caroling existed in Germany in the 15th century because Martin Luther wrote that when Christmas was celebrated he went with others from house to house and village to village singing popular Christmas carols. We could safely assume that caroling was first done by the Choir of Angels who sang, "Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace and good will to all people."

*Lift up your hearts*

# Hanging of the Greens

## The Gifts of Christmas

From the beginning of Christmas celebrations, gift giving has been a part of the season. The Wise Men gave out of their treasures, and the Shepherds gave of themselves. Both express the Gift of God in giving Christ as the Savior of the World.

Unique in our history of generous givers is the story of Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Lycia in the fourth century A.D. He is reputed to have been wealthy, his emblem being three purses and three golden balls. This was the symbol of rich Italian families of his time. It survives today in the signs of some of our pawnshops. The good Bishop gave his money away secretly to those whom he found in need. He was deeply interested in young people, giving his wealth especially to maidens whose lack of a dowry was affecting their matrimonial future, and to needy boys. Gifts coming from unknown sources were commonly attributed to him and parents customarily gave him credit for their gifts to their children.

Hanging up our stockings in pleasant anticipation of Santa's gifts may have originated from the fact that the maidens of this Bishopric of Myra, needing and expecting a dowry from the good Saint Nicholas, suspended a stocking to catch the money purse the generous Bishop was sure to drop down the chimney.



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