

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

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Articles on the Season by Dr. George Grant

The First Sunday of Advent

“There is something about saying, ‘We always do this,’ which helps keep the years together. Time is such an elusive thing that if we keep on meaning to do something interesting, but never do it, year would follow year with no special thoughtfulness being expressed in making gifts, surprises, charming table settings, and familiar, favorite food. Tradition is a good gift intended to guard the best gifts.”

Edith Schaeffer

Throughout history, Christians have marked the passing of the days, weeks, and months of any given year with the sequential details of the Gospel story—with an anticipation of the coming of Jesus during Advent, His birth at Christmas, His trials, temptations, betrayal, and death during Lent, His resurrection at Easter, the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, and then the growth and maturity of the church thereafter until the cycle is repeated the next year. In other words, the keeping of the seasons is a way for us to retell the Gospel every single year, from start to finish.

Advent is thus, the beginning of the “church year” or “church calendar.”

This season is one of those rare times when even the most spontaneous of us loves to recall old traditions and familiar legacies. We love to sing old carols. We love to break out the old dishes, the old recipes, and the old stories. Advent traditions abound.

For instance, the Advent season begins today—four Sundays prior to Christmas. Traditionally, Christian families and churches have celebrated this season of

“Adoration of the Shepherds”



“...God is glorified not only by His glory being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.”

~ Jonathan Edwards

preparation each Lord's day with the lighting of one candle in a small table-top evergreen circle--known as an Advent Wreath--accompanied by an appropriate Scripture reading. The candles vary in color from culture to culture, but generally the first three candles are red or purple and the last one is white or golden. For families that find themselves each year vowing that their celebration of the season will focus more on the real meaning of Christmas and less on the brouhaha, this is the place to begin to set the tone for the holidays.

Another enduring tradition is Saint Nicholas Day. Celebrated on December 6, this day recalls the selfless service of Nicholas of Myra (c. 288-354). The fourth century pastor ultimately inspired the tradition of Santa Claus. In reality, he was a model of graciousness, generosity, and Christian charity. His great love and concern for children drew him into a crusade that ultimately resulted in child protection laws that remained in force for more than a thousand years. His feast day is celebrated around the world. In the Netherlands, cookies and gingerbread treats are often placed in shoes or laid out stockings for the sleeping children--which may well have been the origin of Christmas gifts and hearthside stockings.

Regardless of what particular traditions our individual families celebrate, as we begin this new season of glad tidings, let us enter into a new season of Gospel retelling with great joy, remember the old paths, the old ways, and the old traditions, with new and fresh faith.

Epiphany

The celebration of Epiphany is the culmination of what is traditionally called the Twelve Days of Christmas. The word literally means "revelation" or "sudden unveiling" or "manifestation." It commemorates the day when wise men from the East were conducted by a miraculous star to the nativity in Bethlehem. The magi were thus the first to comprehend that Jesus was not merely the prophetic fulfillment of Jewish aspirations since the beginning of time. Instead, He was the hope of the world, the light

of the world, and the joy of every man's desiring. They beheld the very glory of God that day—for in the city of David, the Savior was born.

As a result, Epiphany is the celebration of the ultimate proclamation of good news. Good news, indeed.

Caroling and Wassailing

Singing traditional carols has long been a beloved aspect of the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany season. Carols are hymns or songs that are usually narrative and celebratory in nature with a simple spirit and are often in verse form. The term "carol" has a varied and interesting past and is derived from several foreign words that include the ideas of dancing, feasting, and rejoicing as well as singing.

Biblical scholars have often asserted that the Angels sang the very first carol to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth. But, Mary's song, the Magnificat, is also a sort of carol.

The idea of caroling through town from one home to another seems to have started sometime during the Reformation in Holland and Scotland. Carolers would visit each house of a parish on Christmas Night to sing songs of the Nativity and to call forth blessings on every home.

The term "wassail" literally means "Good health!" Carolers would go through town "wassailing" to bless their neighbors--who would then often reciprocate by giving them refreshments for the further spreading of good cheer.

Last night after our second service, the congregation of Parish Pres joined together for a brief time of strolling, fellowshiping, and caroling through downtown Franklin (on our way to a home just a couple of blocks from the chapel where we sang and ate way, way, way too many goodies). I hadn't done anything like that in years! We had so much fun. I felt like we were in Mitford. We are a blessed people, indeed.

Mistletoe

The little berries of the Mistletoe plant, renowned for their healing powers, became a Medieval symbol of God's provision and grace. Even when the vast northern forests were buried in deep snows and the hardwood trees had lost all their foliage, the Mistletoe continued to bloom--to offer its medicine of hope to the afflicted and the needy.

Often, families would decorate their doorways with little sprigs of the plant as reminders of providential love. It became a happy ritual for lovers to kiss beneath the sprigs as a kind of covenantal affirmation or renewal of their fealty in the sight of God. A single berry was to be plucked from the sprig for each kiss. Often the bare sprigs were kept as testimony to the couples' vows. Sometime in about the tenth century or so, the hanging of the Mistletoe became an Advent and Christmas tradition.

St. Nicholas

The fourth century pastor who inspired the tradition of Santa Claus, may not have lived at the North Pole or traveled by reindeer and sleigh but he certainly was a paradigm of graciousness, generosity, and Christian charity. Nicholas of Myra's great love and concern for children drew him into a crusade that ultimately resulted in protective Imperial statutes banning child-abuse and abortion--statutes that remained in place in Byzantium for nearly a thousand years.

Though little is known of his childhood, he was probably born to wealthy parents at Patara in Lycia, a Roman province of Asia Minor. As a young man noted for his piety, judiciousness, and charity, he was chosen bishop of the then rundown diocese of Myra. There he became renowned for his personal holiness, evangelistic zeal, and pastoral compassion.

Early Byzantine histories reported that he suffered imprisonment and made a famous profession of faith

during the persecution of Diocletian. He was also reputedly present at the Council of Nicaea, where he forthrightly condemned there heresy of Arianism--one story holds that he actually punched the heretic Arius in the nose. Ho, ho, ho!

But it was his love for and care of children that gained him his greatest renown. Though much of what we know about his charitable work on behalf of the poor, the despised, and the rejected has been distorted by legend and lore over the centuries, it is evident that he was a particular champion of the downtrodden, bestowing upon them gifts as tokens of the grace and mercy of the Gospel.

One legend tells of how citizen of Patara lost his fortune, and because he could not raise dowries for his three young daughters, he was going to give them over to prostitution. After hearing this, Nicholas took a small bag of gold and threw it through the window of the man's house on the eve of the feast of Christ's Nativity. The eldest girl was married with it as her dowry. He performed the same gracious service for each of the other girls on each of the succeeding nights. The three purses, portrayed in art with the saint, were thought to be the origin of the pawnbroker's symbol of three gold balls. But they were also the inspiration for Christians to begin the habit of gift giving during each of the twelve days of Christmas--from December 25 until Epiphany on January 6. In yet another legend, Nicholas saved several youngsters from certain death when he pulled them from a deep vat of vinegar brine--again, on the feast of the Nativity. Ever afterward, Christians remembered the day by giving one another the gift of large crisp pickles.

The popular cultural representation of St. Nicholas as Father Christmas or Santa Claus, though drawing on a number of such legends, was based primarily on a the Dutch custom of giving children presents--slipping fruits, nuts, and little toys into shoes or stockings drying along the warm hearthside--on his feast day, December 6. Throughout the rest of Europe during the Medieval Age, that day was marked by festively decorating homes and by a sumptuous feast that interrupted the general fasting of Advent. And in Scandanavia it was

celebrated as a day of visitation, when the elders of all the remote country churches would bundle themselves in their thick furs and drive their sleighs laden with gift pastries through the snowy landscape to every home within the parish.

But perhaps more than any other sources, the advertising of soft drink manufacturer Coca Cola and the holiday cartoons of New York newspaperman Thomas Nash have profoundly shaped our perception.

Coca Cola's serving trays, signage, and print ads popularized the Nash caricature of a rotund, jolly, fur-draped, gift-laden, and unbidden visitor who pops down chimneys and distributes gifts to children all over the world. Alas, thus stripped of his pastoral function and parish proximity, Santa has become almost fairy-like in his mythic proportions.

Articles were taken from Dr. Grant's blog:
<http://kingsmeadow.com/blogger.html>

December Clean-Up

December 5th -

Ramsey family

December 12th -

Robinson family

Lunch:

December 5th - Pepper's

December 12th - Pizza

Ladies' Christmas Brunch

December 6th - 10 am

at the Moeller House

Thank You!

Heather, Jenny, and Nichole for making the Medieval Feast such a success! We know you put in countless hours in preparation for this fabulous feast. We appreciate all of the wonderful booths that our families shared with us.

Coming Next Spring...

Pilgrim's Progress

Book Study

Get your copy now!