

December 2008

The Twelve Days Of Christmas

A study guide for home, church or personal use

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Introduction

Christmas is not a day, but a season – a 12-day season lasting from December 25 to January 5 during which Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why 12 days? The Bible does not provide a date when Jesus was born. So about 400 years after Jesus' birth, the early church designated December 25 and the 11 days that followed as the Christmas Season. This period of time was chosen because it was within the winter solstice – the time when the nighttime was the longest.

Christmas, as we know it today, is a product of hundreds of years of both secular and religious traditions from around the globe. Since we now live in an increasingly diverse culture, the Twelve Days of Christmas provide a wonderful opportunity to learn about the rich Christmas traditions of other Christians around the world.

Since Christmas day is usually filled with gift-giving and family gatherings, we'd suggest you don't change the routine. Rather, talk about "Why we do these things?" Are they related to our ethnic background? Are they old family traditions? What food do we usually have? How do our normal family traditions help us focus on God's gift to us? Light a candle and read Hymn 277 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *ELW*) "Away in the Manger" as a family prayer or devotion. The Twelve Days of Christmas (Dec. 25 to Jan. 5) come at a perfect time to expand the fun of Christmas. Many holiday parties are over. Children are not in school and have extra time. Now you have time to talk about the Christmas traditions in your family. Best of all, the Twelve Days of Christmas are an opportunity to share your Christmas story and learn from your neighbors' traditions.

The following pages are a guide for the Twelve Days of Christmas. You will be surprised at how easy it is to include the Twelve Days of Christmas into your schedule.

- Meal time is always a good option. Several times, plan to eat food from another culture.
- Plan to have an *ELW* (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) or other book with Christmas hymns at home with you. Each day you will be able to read a Christmas carol from around the world.
- Each day, light one candle on the table as a symbol of Jesus being with us.
- Each day, plan to read the text for the day about the customs from other countries. Visit or talk to your neighbors, or other family members, who may have a heritage from another culture.
- As appropriate, involve younger children in crafts, giving gifts, or talking with neighbors about their Christmas traditions.

Enjoy celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas!

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A Guide for Celebrating the “Twelve Days of Christmas”

Dec. 26 The Second Day of Christmas – German traditions

Do you or some of your neighbors/family have German heritage? Contact them and wish them a Merry Christmas – “Froehliche Weihachten.”

The first “Christmas trees” explicitly decorated and named after the Christian holiday, appeared in Strasbourg, in Alsace, in the beginning of the 17th century. Since there was no electricity, trees were often decorated with candles. In the 1820s, German immigrants to the United States decorated Christmas trees in Pennsylvania. In 1848, the first picture of a Christmas tree was carried by an American newspaper.

Talk about how your family decorates your Christmas tree. Have the younger children draw pictures of trees decorated differently. Maybe the best ideas could be used next year?

Read Hymn 281 (ELW) “Silent Night.” It was written in Germany on Christmas Eve when there was no organ music in the church because a mouse had eaten a hole in the leather bellows. That night “Silent Night” was sung with guitar accompaniment.



Dec. 27 The Third Day of Christmas – Scandinavian traditions

Do you or your neighbors have Scandinavian heritage? Visit or call them and wish them a merry Christmas in their native language!

Sweden – “God Jul!” Most people in Sweden honor St. Lucia each year on December 13. Traditionally, the oldest daughter in each family rises early and wakes each of her family members, dressed in a long, white gown with a red sash, and wearing a crown made of twigs with nine lighted candles. The family then eats breakfast in a room lighted with candles. Thus, light is a main theme of St. Lucia Day. Have children make a Lucia crown (no lighted candles).



Finland – “Hyvii Joulua!” Many Finns visit the sauna on Christmas Eve. Families gather and listen to the national “Peace of Christmas” radio broadcast. It also is customary to visit the grave sites of departed family members during the Christmas season.

Norway – “Gledelig Jul!” Norway is the birthplace of the Yule log. The ancient Norse used the Yule log in their celebration of the return of the sun at winter solstice. Today Yule log shaped cheeses, cakes and deserts are popular during the holidays.

Light a candle and read Hymn 271 (ELW) - “I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve” - a hymn from Scandinavia. Make some Scandinavian cookies.

Dec. 28 The Fourth Day of Christmas – African Americans traditions

Do you have neighbors/family who are African American? Contact them and wish them a Merry Christmas. Ask them about their Christmas traditions. Are any customs from Africa?

During Christmas, our churches are decorated with many colors. Red ribbons. Green trees.

The paraments are white and gold. People also come in many colors. Jesus is God’s gift to people of all colors.



Light a candle and read Hymn 290 (ELW) – “Go Tell It on the Mountain” – a lively African American spiritual. It is one of many African American hymns in the ELW.



Dec. 29 The Fifth Day of Christmas – Native Canadian traditions



In northern Canada, the nights are dark and cold. Some of the Native Canadians are hunters who hunt fox, beaver and rabbit. They live in hunting lodges or cabins that are covered with birch bark. They picture Christmas in quite a different way than we do.

Their images have Jesus coming to be born in their culture and type of home. Their traditions speak of the baby Jesus being clothed with rabbit fur to keep him warm. Hunters (rather than Three Kings) bring gifts of beaver and fox pelts to the infant.

Every culture makes the Christmas story fit into their culture. Isn't it great how Jesus is God's gift to all people of all cultures?

Light a candle and read Hymn 284 (ELW) – "Twas the Moon of Wintertime." It is a lovely carol written in Canada using the images of hunters living in northern Canada.

Dec. 30 The Sixth Day of Christmas – Australia & New Zealand traditions

We sing about a "White Christmas" complete with sleigh rides. But people in the southern hemisphere experience Christmas in the midst of their summer. Nevertheless, it is still Christmas "down under," and they have developed traditions that fit their climate.

In Australia, Christmas comes in the heat of summer. During the warm Australian Christmas season, beach time and outdoor barbecues are common. Traditional Christmas day celebrations include family gatherings, exchanging gifts, and meals of ham, turkey, seafood, or barbecue.

The church in New Zealand has recently published a new collection of Christmas carols that brings to us some new and refreshing insights on Christmas. Living "down under," they have the advantage of seeing Christmas from a different perspective than we do.



Light a candle and read the words of this carol from New Zealand:

Carol our Christmas... An upside down Christmas

Snow is not falling... And the trees are not bare.

Talk about Jesus being God's gift to all people - even to people who live "down under."

Dec. 31 The Seventh Day of Christmas – China traditions

Today is the last day of the year. It might be a good time to think about people who live on the "other side" of the world. Did you know that there are millions of Christians in China who also celebrate Christmas? Yes, their language is different. Nevertheless, in China, Christians gather to sing their Christmas carols just like we do. Jesus is God's gift to all people.



Light a candle and read Hymn 280 (ELW) - "Midnight Stars Make Bright the Skies" – a Christmas carol written in China. God's gift of Christmas goes around the world!

For dinner tonight, order some Chinese food and talk about Christmas in China.

Jan. 1 The Eighth Day of Christmas – English traditions

Many of our modern Christmas traditions came from England. In fact, some would say that most of our contemporary Christmas customs came from the Victorian era in England. An Englishman named John Calcott Horsley helped to popularize the tradition of sending Christmas cards when he began producing small cards featuring festive scenes in the late 1830s. Look through your Christmas cards and talk about the images/messages.

During holidays in the Victorian era, the English would hang sprigs of



NOEL HALLELUJAH MERRY CHRISTMAS HAPPY NEW YEAR
Noel Hallelujah Merry Christmas Happy New Year

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 usual in Victorian society.

Caroling also began in England. Wandering musicians would travel from town to town, visiting castles and homes of the rich. In return for their performance, the musicians hoped to receive a hot meal or money.

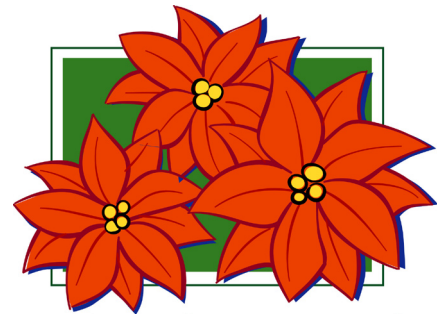
Light a candle and read Hymn 270 (ELW) - "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," a hymn written by John Wesley in England.

Jan. 2 The Ninth Day of Christmas – Latino traditions

Do you have family or friends who speak Spanish? Call them or visit them and wish them "Feliz Navidad!" - Merry Christmas! Soon, one-third of the people living in US will be of Latino heritage.

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 Christmas, the plants, which were called poinsettias after Poinsett, began appearing. Soon they were the universal symbol of the Christmas holiday.

In Mexico, paper mache sculptures called piñatas are filled with candy and coins and hung from the ceiling. Children then take turns hitting the piñata until it breaks, sending a shower of treats to the floor. In Puerto Rico, a special bread is baked and within the bread is a small doll (baby Jesus). The person who is served the piece of bread with the baby will have a good year and will be expected to host the party the next year.



Light a candle and enjoy Hymn 706 (ELW) - "The People Walk" - a Spanish hymn. It is not a Christmas carol, but a hymn of the Latino longing for peace and justice.

Rice and beans are common foods in Latino countries. You might try some Latino food if the family is open to eating new (or sometimes familiar) things.

Jan. 3 The Tenth Day - Slovak and Polish traditions



Today let us think about some of the lesser know countries, Slovakia and Poland, that are in Eastern Europe. There have been Christians living there for centuries. Sadly, these people have suffered under wars and foreign dictators. Peace has at times been missing from their lives. Life was hard, just as life was difficult for Jesus and his parents.

One of the most talented contemporary hymn writers in the Slovak tradition was Jaroslav Vajda. Six of his hymns are in the ELW .

Light a candle and read Hymn 285 (ELW) - "Peace Came to Earth" by Jaroslav Vajda. Think about the importance of peace for those who live in these war-torn countries.

Jan. 4 The Eleventh Day of Christmas – French traditions

Do you have any family or neighbors born in France? Do you know anyone who has been to France? Or maybe a student who studied French? If so, call them and wish them "Joyeux Noel" - Merry Christmas!

In France, Christmas is called "Noel," which comes from a French phrase meaning "good news" (Gospel). In southern France, some people keep a log burning in their homes during the Twelve Days of Christmas.



Light a candle and read Hymn 300 (ELW) – "The First Noel" - a hymn that uses the French term "Noel." Isn't it great that Christmas comes in many languages?

Jan. 5 The Twelfth Day of Christmas

Today is the last day of the Christmas season, so we need to get ready for what comes tomorrow – Epiphany. By now, many folks are thinking about taking down their Christmas tree. The Christmas season is coming to an end, but we do not need to stop celebrating. If Jesus was God’s gift to the world, maybe we could make our tree a “gift” to the animals of the world.



Begin removing the decorations from the tree, but pause as you do, remembering some of the customs you have learned during this Christmas season. Tomorrow you will use your tree as an Epiphany gift to the world after the Christmas season is over.

Jan. 6 – The Feast of the Epiphany



EPIPHANY

Once you have removed all of your decorations from the tree, take it outside. Place the undecorated tree in a place where it can be secured. Then “re-decorate” the tree with pine cones that have been covered with peanut butter. Now you can share your tree with God’s animals. The birds will love your gift to them. Christmas is a season that keeps on giving.

January 6 is the Feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany brings to an end the Twelve Days of Christmas and begins a new season in the church year. Epiphany marks the time when the wise men came and bought gifts to Jesus.

Your Christmas tree now becomes an Epiphany tree. For the next couple of weeks, it will be a visible symbol of making the Good News of Christmas known to the entire world – even to the birds!

Have a Merry Twelve Days of Christmas!



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