

Advent and Christmas

Summary: Advent is a four-week season of preparation for Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ. The prominence of Christmas in American culture has led to the popularization of Christmas carols, the figure of Santa Claus, and the practice of exchanging gifts. Traditions particular to certain expressions of Christianity, such as the Mexican posada, preserve other distinctly religious forms of celebrating Christmas.

The Christian year begins in late November or early December, with the four-week season of preparation known as Advent. For Christians, the weeks leading up to Christmas are not simply the crescendo of holiday excitement that has come to typify the Christmas season in America. More importantly, this season of watchfulness and expectation is meant to prepare the heart to celebrate Jesus' birth some 2,000 years ago, the "advent" of Christ.

In many churches and Christian homes, the period of preparation is kept by the weekly lighting of Advent candles that symbolize hope, peace, joy, and love. One candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, two on the second, three on the third. On the fourth Sunday of Advent, just before Christmas, all four candles are lit. The lighting of candles draws upon ancient traditions of kindling fires during the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year. Since the 4th century, Christians set the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25, the time of the Roman celebration of the "*Sol Invictus*," the "Unconquered Sun," during the winter solstice when days began to lengthen once again. Because of differences in the Gregorian and Julian calendars, however, most Orthodox Christians today celebrate Christmas on January 7.

From its earliest days, the Christian tradition has spoken of Christ as the "Light of the World." For Christians, the candles and lights of the season symbolize the light that has come into the world through Christ. One Christmas hymn begins, "Break forth, O beauteous, heavenly Light, and usher in the morning!" The Christmas lights of today, decking trees, homes, and public buildings, might be seen as a modern transformation of the ancient symbolism of light.

Christmas in America is an amalgam of many distinct traditions, all of which have combined and evolved to create the celebration familiar today. In the 19th century, the custom of New Year's gift-giving was redirected toward Christmas, as new German immigrants brought with them the traditions of the Christmas tree and Christmas gifts. In 1823, Clement Moore's poem "Twas the Night

Before Christmas” entered the repertory as a way of observing Christmas Eve. By the late 19th century, the European St. Nicholas had been transformed, through myth and commerce, into the full-fledged Santa Claus—jolly, bountiful, and distinctly American. The commercialization of Christmas in America began in the 19th century and continues full-force today.

The 19th century Americanization of Christmas also produced many of today’s most popular carols, such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” written by Phillips Brooks in 1868. Today, throughout the Christmas season, the repetition of the story of Christ’s birth is sung in carols, told in narratives, and enacted in dramas. That story is recreated in homes, churches, and parks, with the “nativity scene,” also called a *crèche* or a *nacimiento*. Countless churches present Christmas pageants, where church members take on the roles of Mary and Joseph seeking room in the inn and finding space in the stable instead. The congregation, children included, become the shepherds and angels, and the wise men who saw the star from afar and came bearing gifts.

Hispanic Americans, like immigrants before them, have brought their own traditions of Christmas to America. Among them is the Mexican tradition called the *posada*, which means “inn.” For nine nights, the community follows Mary and Joseph through the streets as they look for room in the inn, stopping at one house after another, singing “In the name of heaven, I beg you for lodging, for my beloved wife cannot walk.” In one place after another, the innkeeper responds, singing, “This is not an inn, so keep on going. I cannot open. You may be bad people.” In such cities as Dallas, Texas, and Fullerton, California, the pilgrims sing their parts. After a long journey through the streets, participants find shelter in a church or community hall, and celebrate with hot chocolate, Mexican sweetbreads, and the breaking of a *piñata* filled with candies.

Along the Mexican-U.S. border in San Ysidro, California, the ritual drama of the Christmas *posada* has taken a powerful new turn. There, at night, across the fences of the border and under the floodlights of the Border Patrol, groups of Christians gather on both sides of the border, bearing images of Mary, Joseph, and the innkeeper. Joseph sings from the Mexican side, “Don’t be inhuman. Have mercy on us. The God of Heaven will reward you for it.” The U.S. delegation, dramatizing the innkeeper, sings, “This is not an inn, so keep going. I cannot open. You may be bad people.” From both sides of the border, they release doves who fly free. As these Christians hold candles in the night air, they speak of the significance of the birth of Christ for this particular historical context. As one American participant explains, “We cannot welcome Christ and reject the poor or the alien.”