
Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year

Introduction

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are Ritual Rich. Most of us have traditional family and individual rituals that we celebrate at this time of year. We encourage you to celebrate your traditional rituals.

For December and January we would like to offer some origins of Christmas Traditions, a Hanukkah Ritual to celebrate in solidarity with our Jewish sisters and brothers, and a prayer for the New Year.

May this year of Grace and Blessing for you and yours!

Christmas Traditions

The Date

The first reference to the feast of Christmas is found in the Roman chronograph of A.D. 354, an almanac copied and illustrated by the Greek artist, Philocalus. This document contains a rudimentary Christian calendar in the form of two sets of dates.

At the head of the first set, for December 25, we find "Birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea."



The date of December 25 was deliberately chosen at Rome sometime between A.D. 274 and 336 in order to counter the pagan feast of "Sol Invictus," the

Unconquerable Sun, a feast which was officially instituted in 274 by the Emperor Aurelian.

From an anonymous treatise dating from the third or early fourth century, we read "...now they call this day the Birthday of the Unconquerable!" Who indeed is so unconquerable as our Savior, who overthrew and con-

quered death? And as for talking about the birthday of the Sun! He is the Sun of Justice! He is the one of whom the prophet Malachi said, "For you who fear my name there will arise the Sun of Justice, with healing wings."



The Paradise Tree

Hanging ornaments on trees seems to go all the way back to Roman times. Decorating a "Christmas Tree," however, seems to date from the 16th century in Germany. There, evergreen branches were freighted down with apples, sugar candy, and painted nuts. The inspiration for the "Christmas Tree" came from the medieval "mystery plays," performed in churches during the middle ages. A yearly favorite was an Advent performance called the "Paradise Play" -- humankind's creation, expulsion from Eden, and promise of a savior. The only prop on stage was a fir tree, with apples suspended from its branches. Eventually the tree found its way into Christian homes.

Later on, to point out to their children that the "paradise tree" was no longer a symbol of sin, but a symbol of salvation, 16th century Germans combined it with another ancient symbol, the "Christmas Light." They also began to hang candles and cookies along side the "apples of sin" to symbolize the grace of "salvation." Thus, the "tree of sin," and the "light of Christ" grew into the tree of light, with its salvation symbols. Today we all call it the "Christmas tree."

Christmas Cards

A little over 100 years ago, a wallpaper designer, Louis Prang of Boston, put on sale the first Christmas cards. However, the practice had been going on in England for at least 20 years before Prang. The first engraved Christmas cards showed up in London in 1842. Today, billions of cards bulge the postcarriers' bags each December. If you send Christmas cards, consider waiting until after Christmas, not only to give the postcarrier a break, but to allow Advent its own time and celebration.

The Christmas Crèche

Crèche is a French word meaning "cradle." It has been part of the Christmas tradition for over 750 years. The nativity scene was popularized as a Christmas custom by St. Francis of Assisi in 1224. St. Francis erected a manger and acted out the first Christmas with a cast of characters that included live animals and real people.

Homemade Crèche Figures

Making your own nativity figures for a crèche can be both simple and enjoyable, and is an excellent way to review the Christmas story with children.

Collect all the pieces of cloth that have been stashed away for months. Make a water and flour solution (make it watery, not pasty). Use a styrofoam cone shape for the body of each figure; use an egg-shaped styrofoam ball for each head. Soak the pieces of material in the flour solution -- do not wring. Then gently drape the wet material over the cone. This can be done in layers. Head pieces can be added, or decorative beads, sequins, etc. while the material is still wet, or they can be glued on after it has dried. Do not move the figures until the material is completely dry (usually 24 hours). The result is a creche unique to your family that can be used year after year.

"Magical" Mistletoe

Cutting the mistletoe was once an occasion of great solemnity. Druid priests headed a stately procession into the forest to the site of the chosen oak.

(Mistletoe grows on oak trees.) The Arch-Druid, robed all in white, climbed the tree and cut down the sacred vine with a golden sickle. Young maidens caught the mistletoe in a fair cloth, spread out below for that purpose. Then the mistletoe was divided, and each family bore home a sprig to hang over the door, for they believed that the powers of the plant to cure and to protect were very great. Indeed, according to legend, warring parties which met under mistletoe were said to have been overcome by its power, so that they would lay down their weapons and depart friends.



The English called the mistletoe "allheal"; the Welsh, "guidhel." Mistletoe later was used in Christian homes

as a symbol of Christ, the divine healer. Today we kiss under the mistletoe.

Mexican Luminaria



The Mexican Luminaria is a simply-made, inexpensive, energy-saving, yet attractive Christmas lawn decoration, as well as a meaningful custom.

The Luminaria consists of a medium-sized brown or other-colored bag with about an inch and a half of sand in the bottom. A votive-size candle is set in the sand.

Instead of a paper bag you can make the Luminaria from a larger juice can. Simply fill the cans with water, freeze, remove from freezer and with a nail and hammer "punch out" appropriate designs. After ice has melted and been emptied out, add sand or small stones and a votive candle as in bag.

Several of these are made to line the sidewalk and steps to the front door on Christmas Eve night as a sign of room and hospitality to Mary and Joseph, and to anyone who might be alone or traveling on this night.

The Christ Candle

The Christ Candle is a beautiful symbol of Jesus, the Light of the World. It is made by using a tall two-inch candle and decorating it with a chi-rho and other symbols of Christ painted on the candle with acrylics or nail polish.

A good day to make the Christ Candle is December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. When the decorating is completed, place the candle in a holder and cover it with a blue mantle, symbolic of Mary. On Christmas Day remove the mantle and light the candle.

The Miracle of the Poinsettia

The poinsettia was named after Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who served as United States Ambassador to Mexico. Upon his return in 1829, he brought this flower with him to his home in South Carolina, where it flourished.

The people of Mexico call the poinsettia "The Flower of the Holy Night." According to a legend, on Christ-

mas Eve long ago, a poor little boy went to church in great sadness, because he had no gift to bring to the holy child. He dared not enter the church; and kneeling humbly on the ground, he prayed and assured God how much he wanted to offer some lovely present. "But I am very poor and dread to approach you with empty hands." When he finally rose from his knees, there, springing up where his tears had fallen, was a green plant, with gorgeous blooms of dazzling red.

The poinsettia is today the traditional flower of Christmastide.

Celebrating Hanukkah

Origins of Hanukkah

Like Christmas, Hanukkah has its origins in the change that happens to the sun during this season. And, like Christmas, Hanukkah has its historic occasion. In the second century before Jesus, the Jewish brothers Maccabees led a victorious revolt against the foreign occupiers of the land and were able to reclaim and rededicate the temple in Jerusalem (the word Hanukkah means "dedication").

The legend says that when the temple was recaptured, all of the sacred oil had been profaned except for a one day supply. It would take eight days to sanctify new oil. But a miracle happened and a tiny bit of holy oil burned for the whole eight days.

In the Jewish tradition, Hanukkah is a home festival. The simple observance of Hanukkah in the home can be occasion for a household to pray together, in union with our Jewish sisters and brothers.

A Simple Ritual for the Evenings of Hanukkah

The ritual calls for a nine-branched candleholder and 44 small candles (3 1/2" birthday candles will work well). Make your own candelabra (called menorah in Hebrew) out of spools attached to a base, tinkertoys assembled in a variety of ways, clay, a piece of driftwood with nine holes drilled into it, etc.



Hanukkah lasts eight days: one candle is lighted the first day, two the second, etc. The ninth hole in the menorah is for the "servant candle" which lights the others each night. The reason for the small candles is that, by one custom, the lights are allowed to burn out each night. While this happens, nothing is done except to watch, to pray, and to enjoy the light, the darkness, and the quiet.

The Service

Light the "servant candle" and recite the blessings:

Lord, Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe.

Lord, You have given us life
and permitted us to reach this season.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
You have sanctified us with your commandments
and commanded us to kindle
the light of Hanukkah.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe.
You performed miracles for our ancestors
in those days, at this season.

Then the candle(s) are lighted and another member of the family says:

We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, wonders, and deliverances which you performed for our ancestors. These lights are sacred throughout the eight days of Hanukkah; we are not permitted to make any use of them, but only to look at them, in order to give thanks to you.

A simple song after this would be good, e.g., a verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" or "Prepare Ye" from Gospel. In silence, let the candles burn out and then remain silent for a few moments in the dark.

Although not a usual part of the service, your family might wish to add a Scripture reading each evening. The following schedule introduces a different prophet each evening and serves to bring a note of the Advent season into Hanukkah:

First night: Amos 5:14-15

Second night: Josea 2:18-20

Third night: Joel 3:1-3

Fourth night: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Fifth night: Isaiah 7:14
Sixth night: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Seventh night: Isaiah 40:3-5
Eighth night: Malachi 3:1

New Year

Celebrating with Family and Friends

Begin the new year in a new way. How about three or four families gathering together on New Year's Eve to share fun, frolic, food, and prayer?

The morning can be spent sleeping in, of course. Each family might share brunch and then gather with the other families for an afternoon of sledding, hiking, cross-country or downhill skiing, swimming, skating, movie-going, whatever. The evening meal can be pot luck or each family might bring a favorite soup with the host family providing bread, salad, and desert. After eating, the time can be spent playing games, telling stories, or just visiting.

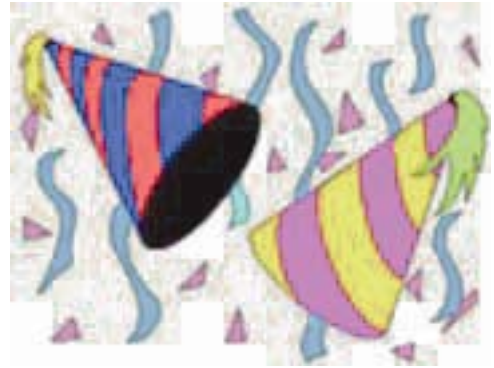
As midnight approaches, all gather with each family having the previous year's calendar. Beginning with January of that year, share the happy and sad memories of each month. When all have shared something of the month, that month's page is torn from each family's calendar and burned, or crumpled if there is no safe way to burn it.

After the old year is remembered, family resolutions for the new year are made and perhaps written on the new family calendar as a reminder. At the stroke of midnight, families wish each other peace, joy, and blessings for the year ahead.

The following New Year's Day Prayer can be prayed together before all depart for home, and for the first few days of the New Year.

New Year's Day Prayer

Lord,
As we begin this year we pray anew
Forgive our forgettings



Melt our hostilities
Give us the courage to begin again.

Make our memories stronger
That we might forget less
Forgive more
Grow in relationships
Reach out further
Show our care
Hurry less
Take the time to do those things
that count the most.

Help us remember
That we need to do this especially
With those who are dearest
Families
Friends
Neighbors
Those who shape our lives and our days.

Keep us peaceful and just
Kind and compassionate
Gentle and generous
Filled with the Light of your love. Amen.

A New Year's custom that deserves ritual is taking this day to visit friends: old friends and new, announced and unannounced visits. Bring along a big bag of nuts (some will think that appropriate for anyone who would not spend New Year's Day before the TV) to share with your friends and with those you meet on the way (try walking!).

Acknowledgments

© Copyright- "Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Years": Sandra DeGidio, OSM;
from *Hill Connections* (<http://hillconnections.org>), a web site linking *Contemplation* and *Social Justice*.