

December 1
Advent

French farmers burn bundles of straw during this time to chase out the small animals which would damage their crops. Italian bagpipe players honor Mary, the mother of Jesus, with their songs. What can we do that will celebrate each day of the holiday season?

The meaning of Advent, a Latin word translated as “the coming”, has changed throughout the centuries. The season was first set aside as a time when those converted to Christianity prepared for baptism. By the Middle Ages, the focus of Advent was on the Second Coming of Jesus rather than His nativity. People viewed Advent in the same way they viewed Lent: as a time of prayer and fasting and reflection on the holiday to come. It is only in recent history that Advent has become a time of anticipation for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

One of the most popular Advent traditions is the Advent calendar. This idea originated in Germany in the 19th century. Families would mark off the days from the first of December to Christmas Eve by making a chalk line on their door. Some families would hang up a picture for each day of Advent or light a candle each day as part of their preparation for Christmas.

There is some debate about the exact year of the first printed Advent calendar, but it is thought to have been between 1903 and 1908. The tradition was suspended during World War II due to the lack of cardboard, but was reborn in 1946 by Germany’s Richard Sellmer, who brought the concept of the calendar to the United States. By the 1950’s, Advent calendars were very popular and were made in many themes, including everything from Scriptures to Santa Claus to even chocolates.

Another popular Advent tradition is the Advent wreath. Again, the exact origin is unclear, but it seems that the lighting of wreaths as a way to celebrate the season began in the sixteenth century. The traditional evergreen wreath contains four candles: three purple and one rose colored taper symbolizing hope, love, joy and peace. In some traditions, the four candles represent the prophets, the Bible, Mary the mother of Jesus and John the Baptist. Many wreaths also contain a white center candle called the Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

It doesn’t matter whether you use a calendar or wreath or another symbol to mark the passage of Advent. What is important is that you focus on its message of peace, hope, joy and love, not just for a season, but for a lifetime.

December 2
Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer

What do a department store, the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, and a singing cowboy have in common? The answer is “the most famous reindeer of all.”

1938 seemed like any other year of the Great Depression, but for Robert May it was a year of personal devastation. His beloved wife, Evelyn, was very sick and would die before year’s end. His meager salary with Montgomery Wards barely paid for food and rent, let alone the medical bills due to Evelyn’s illness. The only joy in his life was the couple’s four-year-old daughter, Barbara.

Each night he took his little girl into his arms and together they took comfort by spinning tales of fantasy and hope. Drawing from his own awkward childhood and fairy tales such as *The Ugly Duckling*, Robert invented a story about a little reindeer that faced difficulty and insurmountable odds.

The story was so popular with young Barbara that Robert decided to share it with his co-workers. At a Christmas party on a cold Chicago evening, Robert May warmed the hearts of his friends with the first public telling of a misfit reindeer named Rudolph.

The employees loved it, and Robert’s boss, Mr. Avery, wanted to share the tale with children everywhere. He purchased the story from Robert and the following year each child who visited Santa Claus at Montgomery Wards was given a copy of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. In fact, over 2 million copies were given away that year alone. Then, in 1946 after 6 million copies had been distributed, Mr. Avery did something extremely generous; he gave back to Robert May all publishing rights to the story, making Robert a wealthy man.

By this time, Robert had remarried and his new brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, asked if he could make the story of Rudolph into a song. Johnny had a way with words and music, so he retold the story of Rudolph with simple lyrics and a catchy tune. Attempts were made to get famous singers like Bing Crosby, to record it, but no one wanted to take a chance on a children’s Christmas song. That is, until Ina Autry, the wife of movie star and singing-cowboy Gene Autry heard it and persuaded her husband to record it. The tune, like the reindeer, went down in history, and soon became the second best-selling Christmas song of all time.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer speaks of optimism despite personal oddities and trials. But the story behind Rudolph speaks of hope and generosity, two qualities which reflect the spirit and meaning of the Christmas season.

December 3
Holly and Mistletoe

This plant makes an excellent Christmas decoration, but can it make you feel better or save you from lightning?

As a bitter British wind blew above them, two warring clans sat under a holly tree and made peace. This was the practice of the ancient Celts as led by their priests who were called Druids. They believed the holly tree was the most powerful tree in the forest since it remained green during the harsh winter months. Because they thought it had magical powers to ward off evil, what better spot to resolve differences than under its branches? Holly was collected and brought into homes during winter months in order to bring good luck and to provide warmth and shelter to various spirits, which they believed lived in its leaves.

Holly also decided headship of the home, at least for a year. Holly trees are either male or female (the female plant is the one with the red berries). Whichever was first brought into a Celtic home determined who was in charge of that home for the coming year: the male plant meant the husband led, the female plant meant the wife was in charge. We can almost imagine the yearly race to see who could bring home the first plant.

Its leaves were made into a tea and used for medicine. The plant was believed to protect against poison (which is interesting since its berries are toxic to humans) and some claimed that the holly tree protected against being struck by lightning.

The ancient Romans adopted the use of holly from the Druids and brought it into their homes. Early Christians took advantage of this and used the holly plant to illustrate the Gospel. The sharpness of the leaves were likened to the crown of thorns worn by Christ, the red berries to His blood, and its evergreen color to everlasting life. Because the Romans decorated their homes with holly during their winter festivals, and because it demonstrated the Gospel, holly naturally became part of the Christmas season. Germans call the plant *Christdorn*; they thought that its berries were originally white but turned red because they were stained with the blood of Christ. Consequently, the Pennsylvania Dutch taught that the plant's white flowers represent the purity of Jesus Christ.

Like holly, mistletoe was used by ancient pagans as an emblem of love and protection. In Scandinavia, mistletoe was symbolic of the goddess of love and their warriors refused to fight if they were under a tree with mistletoe. And, like holly, its leaves and berries can be used to illustrate the Gospel although, ironically, it was outlawed by the Church throughout the Middle Ages.

Many believed it had power to heal. Its poisonous berries were crushed, diluted with water, and used as medicine to cure strokes, epilepsy, and the common cold. But there is

no evidence that mistletoe can heal or can make you feel better. Unless, of course, it is used to secure a kiss from a loved one, which in itself may make you feel better.

December 4
Handel's Messiah

This piece of music was originally written for Lent and Easter and has been sung in churches, but also in action movies and commercials.

When George Frederic Handel wrote his famous oratorio *Messiah*, he probably had no idea that one day it would be heard around the globe as a piece of music associated with the Christmas season. From the beginning, the work was truly inspired. Handel completed the musical score in just 21 days using the words of Scripture arranged by a friend as the accompanying text. Handel once said of the creative process, "I did think I did see all heaven before me and the great God Himself."

Messiah tells the story of Christ's birth, death and resurrection. The work is divided into three segments, and it is the conclusion of the second segment, the Hallelujah Chorus, which remains the most popular song of the entire work. If you've ever seen a performance of *Messiah*, you'll notice that people stand up upon hearing this majestic chorus. That tradition started with its very first performance, when King George II rose to his feet out of reverence to the true King of Kings for whom the chorus was written. Audiences have followed his lead ever since.

But *Messiah* was more than just a wonderful piece of sacred music; it was also a way in which Handel could contribute to various charitable causes. The oratorio debuted in Dublin, Ireland in April of 1742 and the proceeds from this first performance were divided between two hospitals and a jail. From that time on, Handel would generously give the money raised from this work to other needy causes.

For Handel, he wanted his listeners to do more than just hear the beauty of his music. He expected that their lives should be changed by its powerful message. "I should be sorry if I only entertained them," he once said of his audience. "I wished to make them better." Let that be your wish, too, as you hear the words and celebrate the meaning behind *Messiah* this Advent season.

December 5
Gift of the Magi and The Fourth Wise Man

Two different stories, two very different men, but one message of hope and generosity that prepare our hearts to receive the greatest gift of all.

Do you enjoy reading a story with a twist? If so, you can thank American short story writer William Sydney Porter, better known as O. Henry. He penned over 600 short stories during his lifetime, including the Christmas classic, “The Gift of the Magi.”

The tale reveals the story of Della and Jim, a happily married couple with a problem. It is Christmas Eve and neither of them has purchased a gift for the other because there is not enough money. The narrator tells us that there were only two possessions in which the couple took pride. One was Jim’s pocket watch, and the other was Della’s hair. In order to purchase a gift for her husband, Della sold her hair for \$20 and bought a gold chain for Jim’s watch. Of course, her husband was surprised to come home and discover his wife’s beautiful long hair was gone. It was then that Jim offered his Christmas present to Della – a set of pure tortoise-shell combs for her hair. He had sold his pocket watch to get the money for the combs. In the true spirit of the season, each sacrificed their most prized possession for the other.

Amazingly, the life story of O. Henry has all the twists and turns of his famous stories. He was convicted of embezzlement from his job as a bank teller and spent time in prison. He started his own weekly magazine and worked as a newspaper reporter. And despite his talent as an author, he was also an alcoholic who struggled with poor health and financial problems. When he died in a New York hospital, he had just twenty-three cents to his name.

Another author who wrote on the theme of giving was American writer Henry van Dyke. He was a man of many talents, from poet, fisherman and military officer during World War II to Presbyterian minister and professor of literature at Princeton. One of his greatest legacies was to write the words of the famous hymn, *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*, which is set to the music of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

His famous Christmas story, *The Other Wise Man*, tells the story of Artaban, a wise man who is to join the other three Magi in the search for the baby who would become King of Israel. He takes three precious jewels – a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl – with him to give as tribute to this King. But early in the story, he becomes separated from the others and must use his sapphire to purchase a camel for his travels. He arrives in Bethlehem just as King Herod’s soldiers are carrying out orders to kill all the young male children. Artaban offers the second of his treasures, the ruby, to save the life of a mother and her son.

For thirty-three years, Artaban searches for this King with no success. Then he arrives in Jerusalem during the Passover and finds a young slave girl being dragged through the city by a group of soldiers. He purchases her freedom with the pearl, the last of his jewels. Suddenly, an earthquake hits and Artaban is injured and near death. He is dejected

because he has failed to find the King. A voice from heaven then tells him that because he has cared for the least in God's kingdom, he has cared for God himself. Van Dyke writes, "His journey had ended. His treasures were accepted. The other wise man had found the King."

This story is a perfect reminder that we, too, can find the King during this season of advent.

December 6
Saint Nicholas

Yes, there really is a Santa Claus! And history proves it.

“Santa” is the Latin word for “Saint” and the name “Claus” is a nickname for “Nicholas.” This Saint Nicholas was a very real person.

Nicholas was born around 270 AD near the city of Myra in what is modern day Turkey. From an early age he was taught by his parents to love God and to care for the less fortunate. Although he inherited a great sum of money, Nicholas did not live a life of wealth and leisure. Instead, he became a Christian monk, giving his life and riches to help the poor, the hungry, and the sick. His only desire was to help others, but to do it secretly.

One of the members of his parish was a poor man with three daughter. Because the man had no money, he had no dowry for his daughters. According to the custom of that day, without a dowry a woman could not marry and would be condemned to a life of poverty.

On the day when payment of the dowry was due, Nicholas secretly tossed the amount needed through an open window for the oldest daughter. When the second daughter’s dowry was due, the kind priest did the same thing. Although grateful, the father of the girls wanted to know where the money was coming from. When it came time to pay the dowry for the third daughter, the father closed the windows and hid outside his house to see who his benefactor really was. To his surprise, along came his pastor, Nicholas. Tradition says that when the monk found the window closed, he tossed a small bag of gold through the chimney, causing the gift to land in the girl’s stocking which was hung by the fireplace. This is where we get our modern custom of hanging Christmas stockings.

The father approached Nicholas thanking him for his kindness. The priest asked the man not to tell others, but secrets such as these were hard to keep. Soon the kindness and generosity of Nicholas were well known. And, consequently, whenever acts of kindness were secretly preformed, people said it must have been done by Saint Nicholas.

December 6 is considered Saint Nicholas Day in many church traditions. Although our modern symbol of Santa Claus is that of a jolly old man with flying reindeer, the real Saint Nicholas stands as a timeless symbol of generosity, charity, and love.

December 7
WWI Christmas Peace

It has been called one of the most amazing events in the history of humanity, a time of peace on a battlefield with goodwill towards all.

Soldiers were snared deep in the trenches on the frontlines of Europe during the First World War. It was winter, and the harsh weather could only be compared to the harsh reality of war. Christmas was at hand and the message of Christmas, peace and hope, would briefly overcome callous hearts and human conflict. The newly elected Pope, Benedict the Fifteenth, had already suggested a cease-fire for the Christmas season, but it had been rejected by both sides as impossible. Nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, 1914, the impossible became a reality, not by officials or governmental agreement, but as an unofficial truce declared by the soldiers themselves.

German soldiers had cut down a Christmas tree and, with the tradition of that day, lit it with candles. But instead of keeping it in the trenches, the Germans lifted it out of the trench and placed it on the battlefield. The Germans began to place signs in broken English reading, "You no fight, we no fight." The British responded with handmade signs proclaiming "Merry Christmas."

A few British soldiers began to sing a carol they knew their German counterparts would recognize, *Silent Night*. As the words were sung in English, the Germans joined singing the song in their native language. When the song ended soldiers from both sides began to climb out of their trenches with cries of "Don't shoot" and "We don't want to kill you." Both groups met in the middle of what was once a no-man's land; they exchanged names and shook hands. They showed photos from home and offered each other chocolates, souvenirs, and whatever else they could share. A group of Scottish and German soldiers placed their hats as goalposts and played a game of soccer, with the Germans winning by a score of 3 to 2. For a brief time, there was no war. There was only peace.

Sadly, it was short lived. Word spread to headquarters, which ordered that the truce must end and the war resume. After all, no one ordered peace. So German and British officers followed their orders and brought their troops back to their own sides. The officers from both sides stood atop of their trenches, saluted one another, and fired shots into the air signifying that the war would resume.

But for a brief moment, in the middle of World War One, there was peace on earth, good will toward men, just as the throng of angels had proclaimed centuries before. Christmas has the power, it seems, to change hearts. When our focus shifts and we view Christmas as angels do, peace cannot help but bloom. It is unstoppable. After all, the Prophet Isaiah told us that the baby whose birth we celebrate would be called "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). As you anticipate Christmas this year, let peace reign in your heart and allow it to express goodwill towards all.

December 8
The Candy Cane

There are several legends about this sweet Christmas treat, but are any of them true?

The most popular Christmas candy is the peppermint candy cane. Its red and white stripes make it nearly as pretty as it is delicious. Some have even used this tasty treat as ornaments hung on their family Christmas tree, which makes taking the tree down almost as much fun as putting it up because you can consume the decorations instead of boxing them away for next year. But how did the Candy Cane begin and why is it so closely associated with Christmas?

One legend tells of a kindly choirmaster of a large Cathedral who, in the late seventeenth century, was faced with a problem many churches today still have: how to keep children still during the service. The story has it that while traveling through the streets of Cologne, he spied in a shop window something that solved his problem: solid white candied sugar sticks. However, just to give the children candy was something he knew the church leaders would not accept. So, he decided to teach a lesson with the sweets. He persuaded the candy maker to curve the top of the sugar sticks so that they resembled a Shepherd's crook. The white of the candy, said the choirmaster, was a reminder of the purity of the baby Jesus. The shape, he told them, reminds us that Christ is our Good Shepherd. The ploy worked. The Cathedral's priests were thrilled with the illustration, and the children remained quiet, enjoying their treats, for the remainder of the service, or at least until the candy was completely consumed.

History tells us that in 1847 in Wooster, Ohio, a German immigrant named August Imgard decorated his Christmas tree with candy canes, as was the custom from his childhood. This delighted everyone in Wooster, young and old alike, and soon the practice swept across the United States. But it was not until the early 1900's that red stripes and peppermint flavoring were added to the delicious delicacy. In 1920 Bob McCormack, a businessman from Georgia, wanted the fancy treat to be enjoyed by his family and friends, and so he began to mass-produce them. And, in the 1950's, a Catholic priest named Gregory Keller invented a machine that could easily mix the stripes with the white sticks, and with this the candy sensation took hold.

Like the Choirmaster from Cologne, we can use the modern candy cane to illustrate a Christmas message. The refreshing taste tells us that Christmas is a time of inspiration. The three stripes, which most candy canes have, is a reminder of the three gifts given by the wise men. The shape reminds us of the shepherds who visited the Christ child in Bethlehem's manger. And, when turned upside-down, the Candy Cane resembles a *J*, which stands for *Jesus*. And just as these treats are found everywhere, so, too, is the message they represent - a message of good news and hope which endures long after the Christmas season.

December 9
The Nutcracker

Did you know that the author who gave us the adventures classics *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* also helped to retell one of the most famous Christmas stories of all time, which shares its name with a toy and a bird?

One popular symbol of the season is the nutcracker. This toy has been around since the 15th - 16th centuries and was originally designed as a tool for cracking open nuts from their shells. Over time, nutcrackers have evolved from simple carvings of soldiers and kings to a variety of detailed human and animal figures. There is even a Nutcracker Museum in Leavenworth, Washington dedicated to these popular collectibles.

It was the toy that inspired German writer E. T. A. Hoffman to publish a story in 1816 titled *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. This dark tale, written for adults, tells of a young girl raised in a loveless home. She has a nightmare in which she is attacked and physically injured by a seven-headed Mouse King, an injury she still has when she awakes. Her grandfather then explains her dream and tells her that her future husband would bring her a gift of a nut. When she eats it, she regains the beauty lost from her injuries, but the one who gave her the gift becomes old and ugly. The book ends the way it began; she is left in a home void of love.

In 1844, the famous French author Alexander Dumas took Hoffman's tale and adapted it into a children's story. By the end of the nineteenth century, Dumas' version was made into a ballet with a musical score by Tchaikovsky. In this version, the young girl named Clara is presented with a gift of a nutcracker. She falls asleep with it in her arms, and dreams that she is being surrounded by an army of mice led by the Mouse King. Her cries for help awaken the Nutcracker, who musters an army of toy soldiers to come to the young girl's defense. During their battle, the Nutcracker is wounded and it is Clara this time who comes to his rescue, hitting the Mouse King with her slipper. As the mice carry off their fallen leader, the Nutcracker turns into a prince and whisks Clara away to a magical winter wonderland and a land of sweets where she meets the Sugar Plum Fairy. The story ends as Clara awakes hugging the Nutcracker in her arms.

Unlike the original book, the ballet was light, warm-hearted, and ends in a joyful Christmas. Though Tchaikovsky did not consider the work among his best, millions of people worldwide have performed, watched, and loved this holiday favorite. The ballet became a success first in Russia, then in Europe, and finally in America when it made its television debut in 1954.

If we think about it, the transformation of *The Nutcracker* from a sad book to a bright and colorful ballet illustrates how our lives can be transformed by the spirit of grace and goodness found in this joyous season. As you watch or read this great story, remember that love, above all, is what makes Christmas special.

December 10
Truth or Tradition? A Christmas Quiz

Not everything you think is so about Christmas is so.

Say the word “Christmas” and certain images pop into your head. But how we think of Christmas, or at least the Christmas story, may have more to do with tradition than truth. That does not mean that the tradition is not true, but only that it is found in tradition and not in the biblical account of the birth of Christ. So, let’s take a quiz. Are the following statements found in the Bible or just commonly accepted? Are they truth or tradition?

On their way to Bethlehem, Joseph walked while Mary rode a donkey. Is this truth or tradition?

This is tradition. The Bible does not tell us how Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem. It very well may be that Mary rode on a donkey, since she was about to give birth and walking in that state would have been difficult. It also may be that Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem in a caravan of people going to the same place. To get from Nazareth, their home town, to the city of Bethlehem, which was where Joseph’s family was originally from, they would have to go out into the desert. Because of thieves and robbers, it was dangerous to travel in the desert alone, so people of that day would often travel in groups. Joseph may have walked while Mary rode, or they both could have ridden on a cart. We don’t know. But we do know that they had to go to Bethlehem.

When Jesus was born, angels appeared to shepherds in the fields and sang of Christ’s birth. Is this truth or tradition?

This is tradition. It is true that the angel Gabriel appeared to shepherds and told them of Christ’s birth, and it is also true that a host of angels appeared and praised God. But there is no biblical record of the angels *singing*. The Gospel of Luke, where this story is found, reads: “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*” Luke 2:13-14. The text tells us that they spoke, not that they sang.

When Jesus was born, he was placed in an animal’s food trough. Is this truth or tradition?

This is truth. Luke tells us that Mary, “*brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger;*” Luke 2:7. A manger was used as a trough to feed animals.

At the birth of Jesus, shepherds, wise men, and angels all came to see Him at the same time. Is this truth or tradition?

This makes for a wonderful nativity scene or Christmas card, but this is tradition. There is no mention in the Bible of angels appearing beside the newly born Jesus. And, while the New Testament tells us that shepherds did go to see the newborn King, the wise men do not show up until later. They are not found in the same story as the shepherds, which is in

the Gospel of Luke, but instead are found in the Gospel of Matthew and seem to have arrived some time after the birth of Christ.

Last question: There were three wise men who came to give gifts to Jesus. Is this truth or tradition?

This also is tradition. There may have been only three wise men, or Magi as they are also called, but we are not told how many came to worship Christ. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that they brought three gifts, but it does not tell us how many wise men there were.

So, how did you do? If you got all five right you are a real Bible scholar. If you got three or four right, you are able to separate Christmas truth from Christmas tradition. If you only got one or two right, you might want to spend some time reading the Christmas story as found in Luke chapter 2 and Matthew chapter 2. And, if you did not get any right you might want to check your Christmas stocking and hope there is more than a lump of coal.

December 11
Traditional Christmas Foods

Would you still want to eat this traditional Christmas food if you found out it was 25 years old?

Think about that the next time you open a package containing Grandma's homemade fruitcake. And if you don't like fruitcake, you're not alone. Most people have a very strong opinion about whether or not they enjoy this holiday delicacy. A basic fruitcake is a heavy cake filled with candied fruits and nuts and soaked in liquor such as brandy or rum. Powdered sugar is also sometimes sprinkled on top to prevent mold from forming on the cake. It is true that the shelf-life of a fruitcake is up to 25 years; thankfully most people seldom wait this long to eat it.

Fruitcakes date back to ancient Rome, although they become popular in Europe in the 1700s as a wedding cake. The fruitcake, also called the bride's cake, was specifically chosen for its longevity. It formed the top tier of the wedding cake and was removed and preserved for the newly married couple to eat on future anniversaries. The bottom tier, which was called the groom's cake, was similar to today's wedding cake, except for the fact that some single women would sleep with a piece of this groom's cake under their pillow so that their dreams of a husband would come true.

And what about figgy pudding? It is an English dish whose main ingredient is figs, of course! The figs are combined with ingredients such as flour, applesauce, nutmeg, cinnamon and milk and poured into a pudding mold and steamed. The finished dessert has a flavor similar to that of bread pudding.

Maybe you don't like fruitcake or figgy pudding. One traditional Christmas food most people can agree on is Christmas cookies. They come in a variety of flavors and colors and shapes. But all of them originated from Holland and were called *koekjes*, which means "test cakes." The first cookies were small portions of cake batter that were baked to test the temperature of the oven before inserting full-sized cakes.

One particular type of cookie, the sweet and spicy gingerbread cookie, has an unusual history. It is thought to have originated in Bavaria by medieval monks who coated communion wafers with gingerbread dough to keep them from sticking to the pan. Thus the gingerbread cookie was born!

But what about gingerbread houses? This tradition began in the nineteenth century thanks to the Grimm Brothers. One of their fairy tales, *Hansel and Gretel*, describes the adventures of two children alone in the woods who stumble upon a house made of candies and cake and bread - a gingerbread house. Families have been recreating this legend ever since by building their own edible houses.

And if you haven't had enough Christmas treats yet, then head to France for the ultimate holiday indulgence. There, the last meal of advent ends with the serving of 13 desserts,

one for Christ and each of the 12 disciples. There might even be a fruitcake or two on the menu.

December 12
Angels

We sing about them, watch them on TV and movies, but could they be watching us?

Some of the most fierce warriors and noble explorers were the Vikings. History is filled with tales of their exploits and adventures. They were individuals who faced both life and death with undaunting courage. But did you know it is because of the northern Vikings that we have one of the most charming ornaments of Christmas: angels made of straw or twigs? Upon their conversion to Christianity and in celebration of Christmas, Vikings would make these angels as reminders of the Christmas message.

What would Christmas be like without angels? Today we place their images on top of Christmas trees or as hanging ornaments. We adorn our mantels and decorate our homes with them. We sing carols such as “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Christmas pageants and live nativities are filled with angels. In fact, apart from Santa Claus, angels are the most popular symbol of the season. And justly so, because they are closely associated with the Christmas story: It was the Angel Gabriel who appeared to the Virgin Mary proclaiming that she would give birth to the baby Jesus. An angel spoke to Joseph assuring him that he should take Mary as his wife. It was an Angel of the Lord that first appeared to the lowly shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, announcing the birth of Christ, followed by a host of angels declaring the glory of God. And, it was an angel that warned the wise men of Herod’s treachery, guiding them safely back to their home country.

Not only did an angel look after the wise men, but throughout the Bible angels are seen as ministers of mercy and protection. It was the Angel of the Lord who led the people of Israel through the wilderness. The prophet Daniel was not harmed when thrown into the lion’s den because an angel of God protected him. And the Apostle Peter was freed from prison and certain death because an angel delivered him. This is why we speak of guardian angels, those special, yet invisible, beings who watch over us to keep us safe.

Within the course of human history there have been numerous accounts from persons who claim to have seen angels. It is possible that you may have seen one and not even known it. The New Testament tells us that when we show kindness and hospitality to others, it may be that we are, without our knowledge, entertaining angels.

Christmas is the season of generosity. It allows us the opportunity to give to those who are less fortunate than ourselves and to show peace and love toward others. One of the greatest gifts you can give your family is to be an example by helping those in need; to give, not just your money, but also your time. To comfort those who are hurting. To visit those who are sick. To feed those who are hungry. Use this season not only to decorate your home with angels, but to decorate your life by acting like one. After all, it is Jesus’ birthday that we are celebrating. What greater gift can we give to Him than to act like angels of mercy and help those who need it most?

December 13
Christmas Trees

They are perhaps the most popular symbol of the season and one that is friendly to our environment.

On a cold German morning in 723 AD one man bravely stood against the tide of tradition and tragedy. Although originally from England, Saint Boniface of Devonshire had felt called of God to establish churches in France and Germany. While in central Germany Boniface encountered some worshippers of the pagan god Thor. In order to appease their god a human child would be sacrificed while tied to a tree called the Oak of Thor. Enraged against the concept of human sacrifice, Boniface took an ax and with a mighty blow fell the oak tree.

The people were amazed to see a small fir tree next to where the oak once stood. Boniface took advantage of their astonishment to tell them that the true and living God did not demand human sacrifice. Using the fir tree as an illustration, the priest explained that the evergreen represented everlasting life. As the cold of winter could not kill the tree, so the Gospel could not be silenced. He told them that God had already given His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, they did not need to sacrifice their own children. From that point on, the fir tree became a symbol of Christianity and Christmas.

Many years later, legend tells us that a German man was walking home one December evening when he spotted a fir tree in the woods. He noticed the twinkle of stars shining through the branches of the tree. Perhaps with Saint Boniface in mind, the great reformer Martin Luther cut down the tree and brought it into his house for his children to see. Since stars could not be placed in Luther's home, he substituted them with small white candles, placing them on the branches of the evergreen. This, many believe, was the beginning of what would become a world-wide tradition: the lighting of the Christmas tree.

Christmas trees were common in Germany, but it was not until 1841 that they became popular elsewhere. England's Queen Victoria had married Germany's Prince Albert, and along with Albert came several German Christmas traditions, including the Christmas tree. Since the Queen of England had a tree in her home, it became fashionable for others in England to have one in their home as well. It wasn't very long before the custom spread around the globe.

Today, the Christmas tree is the most recognized emblem of Christmas and, we might add, the one that is the friendliest to the environment. Not only do Christmas Trees remove dust and pollen from the air, but they also produce a great deal of oxygen and prevent soil erosion. Most real Christmas trees are recycled, further helping the environment. This makes the Christmas tree not only a beautiful symbol of the season, but also a gift to all humankind.

December 14
Nativity Scenes

They represent one of the great icons of Christianity, but sometimes those presenting them can get *really* cold.

The Bible tells us that when the wise men saw the star, they rejoiced and followed it until they found the young child, Jesus. The Bible also states that an angel appeared to shepherds and told them of Christ's birth. The shepherds then went to Bethlehem, and rejoiced when they saw the newborn king. Mixing these two accounts together has produced one of the most recognized images of Christianity, *the Nativity*. Shepherds, Wise Men, Mary and Joseph, a stable with an angel over it, a donkey, a cow, some sheep, perhaps a camel or two, and in the midst, lying in a manger, the baby Jesus.

The actual events may be somewhat different. The stable was most likely a nearby cave. Since there really was a manger, it implies barn animals, but we are not told in Scripture what animals (if any) were present when Christ was born. And, it seems that the wise men showed up after the shepherds had left. By the time they arrive, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is called a "young child," not a babe, and the holy family is living in a house, not a stable. Still, the image of the Nativity is a powerful one filled with joy, reverence, and awe.

The word *nativity* simply means *birth*, and is based on the word for *native*. In the early part of the Middle Ages, European Christians often carved figurines associated with the birth of Christ and placed them in their homes. They would carve animals, shepherds, Joseph, Mary, and of course the baby Jesus. Although carved, the wise men were not added to the nativity scenes until January 6th, twelve days after Christmas, which is traditionally the *Day of Epiphany* (which means *illumination* or *discovery*). It is the day celebrating the Magi's arrival. Interestingly, the twelve days from December 25th until January 6th are the twelve days of Christmas, the same twelve days of which the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* refers. Therefore, the homemade nativity scenes remained until after the first week of January.

The first live nativity dates back to 1223 when Saint Francis of Assisi constructed a nativity scene outside his church in Italy. He used it as a teaching lesson and placed live animals around his manger scene to the delight of children and all who came to see what Saint Francis had assembled. Little ones were permitted to play in and around the erected nativity scene, while many would sing songs of joy praising God for the gift of His Son.

Soon, those who came to enjoy the living nativity began to act out biblical parts. Some came as shepherds and some portrayed Joseph or Mary. But all enjoyed the humble priest's gift to his community. In time, word spread and others imitated what Francis had created. Role playing developed into plays and from these came Christmas pageants.

Depending on where an individual lives, a live nativity can be very challenging. Yet, despite snow, drizzle, and bitter wind, many brave souls don first century garments and

face December's weather, all because they have a story to tell. After all, it is the greatest story every told.

December 15
Go Tell It On The Mountain

Is it possible that one simple Christmas song can bring people of all races and backgrounds together in the true spirit of the season?

In the years following the Civil War, America was a nation struggling for healing and rebirth. Slavery had ended and the sons and daughters of those who had suffered under its grip were now finally born into freedom. But would the enduring hope and deep spirituality of the slaves be passed down to these future generations? The answer is yes, thanks to an African-American choir director from Knoxville, Tennessee who committed his life to preserving Negro folk songs and spirituals. His legacy has given us one of America's most beloved and performed Christmas songs.

John Wesley Work was a man of great influence, particularly among students of Fisk College. The university was founded in 1866 to give freed slaves an opportunity for higher education. The school produced the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers, a group of vocalists who traveled the world to perform inspiring Negro spirituals.

Several members of the singing group were also members of Work's church choir. They took his musical arrangements of "sorrow songs" or "spirituals" back to the Jubilee Singers and soon Work's music was being performed before world leaders such as Queen Victoria and President Chester Arthur. One of the group's earliest songs had a simple message: "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain, Our Jesus Christ is born."

Fisk College graduate WEB du Bois, who wrote *The Souls of Black Folks*, referred to the Negro spiritual as "*the most original expression of human life and longing born on American soil.*" Most of the spirituals focused on the pain and suffering of life in bondage. But *Go Tell It on the Mountain* stood out as the battle cry of a redeemed people. It was, as du Bois wrote, "*a true expression of a people's sorrow, despair and hope, an articulate message of the slave to the world.*"

The successful Jubilee Singers, in addition to preserving the musical heritage of the slave, was able to pay off the school's \$150,000 debt and build the school's first permanent building which still stands today on the Fisk University campus.

And as for John Wesley Work, he passed on his love of music and culture to his sons and grandsons. His son and namesake John Wesley Work II became a professor of Latin and history at Fisk College and his daughter-in-law worked with the Jubilee Singers as a music teacher. Along with his brother Frederick, he first published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in a collection titled *Folk Songs of the American Negro* in 1907. Work's grandson, John Wesley Work III, graduated from Julliard and dedicated his life to continuing the study of spirituals and folk songs. He served as a teacher at Fisk University and directed the Jubilee Singers, and his studies of folk culture of African-Americans in the Mississippi Delta region are featured in the catalogues of the Library of

Congress. It is his updated arrangement of the song, first published in 1940, that we sing today: a simple song with a message of hope and good news for all people.

December 16
A Christmas Carol

This story had a working title of “The Sledgehammer” and it is still hitting the mark with its moral message for millions of readers today.

The great novelist Charles Dickens began life as a happy child, immersed in the pleasures of reading and daydreaming. All that changed when he turned twelve and was sent to work 10-hour days in a boot-blackening factory to pay off his family’s debts. From that time on, Dickens not only grew resentful of his situation, but was resolved to expose the hardships of the poor working class in 19th century England.

Dickens did escape the factory and went on to briefly study law before deciding on a career as a journalist. He completed his first novel, the *Pickwick Papers*, in his early twenties. From there, his destiny was to become an author.

Many people do not realize that *A Christmas Carol* is the first of four stories Dickens wrote about the season. He wrote it in about six weeks and it was the only one of the four to achieve a wide fame. After its publication on December 17, 1843, the story sold thousands of copies within just a short time. Today, it is the most well-read and performed piece of Christmas literature. Legendary actors have brought its message to the stage and screen. So have pop-culture icons like Kermit the Frog, Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny.

People are still enchanted by the story of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge, who was visited on Christmas Eve by the ghost of his deceased business partner Jacob Marley. Marley carried a heavy chain with him as a punishment for his earthly selfishness and tells Scrooge that he must change his ways or he will share the same eternal fate. Marley has his work cut out for him, though, as Scrooge hates the celebration of Christmas. “If I could work my will,” said Scrooge indignantly, “every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.” Marley enlists the spirits of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come to show Scrooge how his stinginess has hurt himself and others. In the end, the spirits persuade Ebenezer to change his heart. He shows kindness and generosity to one of his poorly treated employees, Bob Cratchit, and his poor lame son, Tiny Tim.

When he realizes the error of his ways, Scrooge says, “I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.” Scrooge’s words are wise advice for us today as we keep the spirit of the season burning in our hearts all year long.

December 17
Christmas Trivia

It may seem like unimportant information to you, but at one time it actually referred to the teaching of grammar, rhetoric and logic in a medieval university.

Trivia is a word we use today to mean insignificant or useless information. Centuries ago, a form of the word *trivia*, “*arte triviale*,” was used to describe the less-challenging studies of undergraduate students before they would move on to the weightier topics of astronomy, mathematics and music. Now, people of all ages and backgrounds collect trivial factoids in a variety of ways, from watching game shows to playing board games to surfing the web. As we near the end of the Advent season, amaze your friends with these tidbits of Christmas trivia.

- Christmas trees take 7-10 years to mature.
- There are about five million reindeer worldwide.
- Christmas caroling grew popular in the United States after the Civil War as carolers sang in exchange for donations to charity.
- In some Scandinavian countries, the Christmas tree is not taken down until January 13, which is called “twentieth day.”
- Charles Dickens considered using the names Little Larry, Puny Pete and Small Sam before deciding on Tiny Tim for the lovable boy in *A Christmas Carol*.
- From 1647 – 1660, it was illegal to celebrate Christmas in the Puritan colonies.
- The first Salvation Army kettle was actually a large crab pot placed on a street in San Francisco to collect donations for a charity dinner in 1891.
- In the Ukraine, a spider web found on Christmas morning is believed to bring good luck.
- *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island* author Robert Louis Stevenson actually willed his November 13 birthday to a friend who disliked her own Christmas birthday.
- *Jingle Bells* was first written as a song for Thanksgiving.

Did you learn something new about Christmas? Remember that the meaning of this season is far from insignificant as you reflect on why we celebrate Advent. The message we prepare to receive during these weeks is of the greatest importance, at Christmastime and all year long.

December 18
Gifts

It is the most asked question following Christmas. How you answer it reveals more about yourself than you may think.

So, what did you get for Christmas? As long as there has been a Christmas, there have been gifts given in celebration of its arrival. The very first Christmas was celebrated with presents. The wise men came with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and offered them to the young Christ child in honor of His birth. Most people have wonderful memories of their childhood Christmases, and how they anticipated the arrival of Santa Claus with his gifts for all the good boys and girls. The same is true of most adults. While they may not be waiting for the arrival of St Nick, they are looking forward to what is under the tree marked with their name.

It used to be that at Christmas people gave gifts to their king. Whenever the season approached, everyone would give something to those who had authority over them. That made Christmas not so joyful for the poor in the land, who had little or nothing to give to the person who was to defend them from invading nations. Needless to say their homes did not get military protection when it was needed.

That changed in the tenth century thanks to a Bohemian duke, now remembered as good King Wenceslas. Instead of insisting on gifts *from* his people, Wenceslas adopted the lessons of the wise men and gave gifts *to* his people. On the day after Christmas, December 26th, also known as Saint Stephen's Day, the good ruler wandered through his kingdom and provided for the poor of his land. Often, he did this secretly or in disguise, so that the joy would be in the giving and not in the recognition of him as the giver. This selfless benevolence to others inspired nearby kings to do the same, and soon giving gifts became a tradition. In 1853 an Anglican priest named John Mason Neale set the story of the Bohemian duke to a tune from the 13th century and provided for us the Christmas carol *Good King Wenceslas*. Today, the song reminds us of the nature of Christmas giving.

Helen Keller once observed that “the unselfish effort to bring cheer to others will be the beginning of a happier life for ourselves.” While giving gifts to our friends and loved ones is something that should be encouraged, we should also take time to provide for the poor of our land. Give toys for children who otherwise may be without. As a family, help those in need by making sure they have something warm to wear and food to eat. Look for ways you can give to others and become creative in helping those who may need it the most. The best gift you can get is the joy you receive when you have given so others can enjoy. The courageous British Prime Minister Winston Churchill reminded us: “We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.”

December 19
Birthday Cakes for Jesus

Most likely you get one every year, but did you know it's all because of Christmas?

Just about everyone enjoys birthday parties, and especially birthday cake. They come in all different shapes and flavors, and most of us enjoy them with a scoop or two of ice cream. But what do they have to do with Christmas?

Some historians believe that birthday cakes originated in Germany during the Middle Ages, not as part of our birthday festivities, but as a Christmas treat celebrating the birth of Christ. The Germans would make the cake, or sweet bread, in the form of the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. They would keep this delicious treat until Christmas Day when it would be consumed. Because the cake was so popular it was also used during the *kinderfest*, which was a birthday celebration for young children.

Other historians believe birthday cakes date back to ancient Greece. It is claimed that the Greeks made honey cakes for their birthday to remind them of the sweetness of life. Today, Greeks still celebrate birthdays and enjoy birthday cake as much as anyone else. But at Christmas, they have a special cake in celebration of Christ's birth. The Christmas feast is of major importance in Greece; it begins with 40 days of fasting. On Christmas Day a special loaf of bread is made called *christopsomo* (meaning Christ Bread). Since it can be made with walnuts, raisins, lemon peels, almonds and vanilla extract, you can imagine how wonderful it smells while cooking, especially if you have been fasting for the past 40 days. In Victorian England, Christmas cakes were very common. Often they were made with gifts baked right in them. In a slice of cake you might find toy marbles, small figures, coins or candies, so you needed to be careful of not only how much you ate, but what you were eating.

Today we still have baked treats to celebrate Christmas including various types of fruit bread, Christmas cookies, cup cakes, and other confectionary delights. One way of keeping Christ in the celebration of Christmas is to bake a birthday cake for Jesus, which can be used as a symbol of the season. A white cake would represent the purity of Christ with red icing or red trim to represent His blood. A small nativity scene can be placed on top of the cake. Or, you can write "Happy Birthday Jesus" in icing. You can place one candle on it to stand for Christ as the light of the world, or twelve small candles to represent the apostles. Regardless of how you make your cake or what you place on it, it can be a fantastic family time and wonderful reminder of just why we celebrate Christmas. After all, it is His birthday. And, like all birthdays, it's a great time to eat cake.

December 20
X-Mas

Is it an attempt to remove Christ from Christmas, or does it mean something else? And just how does “X” mark the spot?

It may come as a surprise, but the phrase “Merry Xmas” pre-dates our modern commercialized society by almost two thousand years. It was original meant to exalt Christ, not remove Him from the holiday.

Among the Jews and early Christians the name of God was sacred. In fact, the Jews were forbidden to mention God by name. When writing God’s name, or even the word *God*, many would shorten it to a single letter with a line drawn over it. This allowed God to be mentioned without really saying His name. In the first few centuries after Jesus was born, scribes who copied the New Testament by hand did the same thing. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. So when the Greek names *Jesus*, *Christ*, *Lord*, or *God* were written, they were shortened to a few letters with a line drawn over them.

The Greek name for *Christ* is *Christos*, and begins with the Greek letter *chi* (which looks like an X). The letter *chi* was used by early Christians as a symbol for Christ, and was commonly used to represent Him (not only because it was the first letter of the name Christ, but also because the Greek *chi* was crossed and was sometimes used to represent the cross of Christ). Just as a fish is used as a symbol of Christianity, so the letter *chi* was used as a symbol by the early Church. Often Christians would mark their places of worship and homes with the letter *chi*. Many of the traditional places associated with Christ, such as a cave in Bethlehem thought to be the stable where Christ was born, were also marked with the letter *chi*. Thus, a *chi* (or X) marks the spot of Christ’s birth.

In the Middle Ages when Biblical manuscripts were made and illustrated with lovely works of art and calligraphy, the Greek word *Christos* would often have a large *chi* (or X) drawn. Since a number of the population could not read Greek, they could see the large X and knew that it stood for Christ. Over time, the phrase “Xmas” was used to mean Christmas. In the 1800’s American churches promoted Christmas services using the phrase “Xmas” (understanding its historical and liturgical meaning). Advertisers picked up on this, and since they had to pay for each letter when publishing ads, saved money and space by wishing all a “Merry Xmas.”

There are many ways of keeping Christ in our celebration of Christmas; understanding the phrase “Merry Xmas” is one of them. As the early Christians marked their homes with His name, let us mark our hearts and lives with His message of hope and peace.

December 21
Season of Light: Christmas-Hanukah-Kwanzaa

Light contains a rainbow spectrum of colors and travels at an amazing speed of 186,000 miles per second. But how does it radiate its significance during the holiday season?

It is easy to see why the holidays are referred to as the season of lights. At Christmas, there are twinkling bulbs on the tree, candles in the windows, brilliant outdoor light displays, and perhaps most dazzling of all, bright smiles on the faces of happy children. Each of these things gives this special time of year a warm, joyous glow. But Christmas is not the only seasonal holiday to use light as part of its celebration.

Kwanzaa is an African-American holiday that begins on December 26 and lasts through January 1. Its name comes from a Swahili word meaning the first fruits of the harvest and it is a time when families celebrate the bounty of the earth and remember their African heritage.

An important part of Kwanzaa is the lighting of the kinara, which is a wooden candle holder with seven branches. It contains one black candle representing people, three red candles symbolizing struggle, and three green candles representing the hope for the future that evolves from struggle. Each day during Kwanzaa, a different principle is taught and a candle is lit.

There are seven principles that make up the celebration of Kwanzaa: unity of family, community and race; self-determination which means to define and speak for one's self; collective work and responsibility, which involves building community and solving problems together; cooperative economics, which involves building and maintaining stores and businesses and making a profit; living with purpose in developing the community; living creativity to enhance and develop the community; and living in faith to believe in the victory and righteousness of struggle. During the weeklong celebration, families tell stories, sing songs, learn new skills, complete a project together, and perform dances to reinforce these seven principles.

Another celebration that brightens the holiday season is Hanukkah. Often referred to as the festival of lights, Hanukkah is a minor Jewish holiday starting on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev. It commemorates the victory of an army of ancient Jews known as the Maccabees against Syrian ruler Antiochus IV and the army's reclaiming of the temple upon Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The word *Hanukkah* in Hebrew means *dedication* and refers to the rededication of the temple to God by the Maccabees.

As the triumphant army prepared for the rededication, they found there was only enough consecrated oil to keep the temple light aflame for one day. However, a miracle took place and the light burned for eight days. This miracle is celebrated today by the lighting of the menorah, or *hanukiya*, as it is called in Hebrew. The menorah is a candleholder with nine branches. It holds eight candles of equal height, one for each day of Hanukkah,

plus a tall one in the center called a servant candle which is used to light the others. Each evening, a special blessing is said as the menorah is lit.

As you see lights and candles and other symbols of the holidays, take time to celebrate the many traditions that honor God and create wonderful family memories. Let the joy that comes from the light of a holy presence radiate through you this season and all year long.

December 22
We Three Kings of Orient Are

It sounds as if it originated from Persia during the Middle Ages, but it was written by an American in 1857. And, although sung as a Christmas Carol, it was not written for that purpose.

John Henry Hopkins Jr. was a reporter, a lawyer, a brilliant scholar, Episcopal priest, and a life-long bachelor. He loved children, adored Christmas, and in his later years even resembled Santa Claus. And, like St. Nick, having no children of his own, he wished to do something for all children everywhere. So, he gave them a song filled with legends, history and joy.

Christmas had passed, but John needed to give his brothers' children something special for Epiphany. In the tradition of the Episcopal Church, as well as some other churches, January 6 is celebrated as the Day of Epiphany: the day when the wise men found the Christ Child. At that time it was also customary to give gifts, just as the wise men gave their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus.

John wanted his nieces and nephews to have something special that they could share with others, as well as learn from themselves. Sitting at his desk, he began to write a song that commemorated this special day.

Because John was a minister, he knew that the Bible does not tell us how many wise men came to Bethlehem searching for Jesus; it only mentions that they gave Christ three gifts. Nor does it tell us that these wise men, or Magi, were kings. But John also knew the historical legends of Church history. And, being a biblical scholar, John knew that in the Old Testament book of Psalms, there is a prophecy about Christ where kings would offer gifts to Him (Psalm 72:10). One of these kings mentioned is from the ancient nation of Sheba in southern Arabia, which was noted for its gold and frankincense and myrrh.

With this in mind, John Henry Hopkins wrote the story of the wise men, their journey, and their gifts offered to the young Jesus. All of this is found in the Carol, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. Although originally written as a gift for his family members, it has become a gift for all of us, causing us to focus not only on the wise men of Scripture, but also on the One they sought.

December 23
The Star of Bethlehem

Up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, no it's . . . the star of Bethlehem?

It is as much a part of the Christmas story as the wise men or the baby in the manger. But what was the original Christmas star? Some have suggested that the star was not a literal star but a planet, which is often referred to as a star. Venus, for example, is called "the day star." To the naked eye planets appear as stars.

Some scholars have suggested that the conjunction of the planets Saturn, Jupiter and Mars account for the Bethlehem star. A conjunction of planets is where, from earth's perspective, planets line up one behind the other. A triple conjunction of planets is *very* rare and would have gained the attention of ancient astronomers. In 7 BC there was a triple conjunction of these three planets.

Others suggest a different conjunction. From August of 3 BC until June of the following year, something very unusual occurred with the planet Jupiter. First, it lined up with the planet Venus. Then, about a month later, it moved next to a star named Regulus. This star was considered the star of royalty just as Jupiter was thought to be the king of planets. After Jupiter aligned itself with Regulus, it then appeared to move back and forth around the star, passing it three times. This would give the appearance of the king of planets circling the king of stars.

Others have suggested that the Bethlehem star was just that, a star. Some believe that a star became a *supernova* (where a star explodes), but we do not have any records of such a thing happening around the time Jesus was born. Others suggest that a star became a *recurring nova*. About every ten years or so we can observe a star turning into a nova, where it increases in brightness. A recurring nova is rarer; a star becomes bright for a few months or even years, dims, and then becomes bright again. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told that the star appeared to the wise men in the east, and then reappeared to them later near Jerusalem, leading them to Jesus in the city of Bethlehem.

Still, others see the Christmas star metaphorically as an angel who, in the light of his glory, led the wise men to Christ. In the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, we are told of seven stars who are "seven angels" (Revelation 1:20).

Regardless, the star of Bethlehem is forever associated with the celebration of Christmas. It is the star that told of the Birth of Christ and it shines in a dark world as a perfect representation of the One who is called "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

December 24
The Twelve Days of Christmas

Is it a hidden code teaching us mysteries of Christmas? Or is it an urban legend?

For most of us, Christmas Day is the commemoration of Christ's birth and is celebrated by exchanging gifts. But in some traditions gifts are exchanged on January 6th, the Day of Epiphany, which celebrates when the wise men first encountered the baby Jesus. It was also customary to exchange small gifts on the twelve days from December 25th until January 6th. This time was referred to as the *Twelve Days of Christmas*, and is why the famous song by the same name mentions gifts of everything from a partridge in a pear tree to twelve drummers drumming. But what do these strange gifts mean?

According to some scholars the song used symbolism to teach the Catholic catechism. In England from 1558 until the first part of the 19th century Roman Catholics were not allowed to openly practice their Faith. So they adopted a traditional English carol, teaching that it had two meanings. On the surface it was a love song, but it also had a religious meaning.

Throughout the song we are told of gifts given by "my true love." This, it was taught, was a reference to God. His first gift was a partridge in a pear tree, which meant Christ on the cross. A mother partridge will sacrifice her own life in order to protect her young. So Christ gave His life in order to save others.

The two turtle doves stood for the Old Testament and the New Testament. Three French hens for the three lasting gifts mentioned in the New Testament: faith, hope, and love. Four calling birds represented the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Interestingly, the song originally called them "four *colly* birds" which meant black birds. Later, it was changed to "calling birds." The same is true of the five golden rings. Originally it was "five golden *ring*" meaning golden-ring *pheasants*, not jewelry. Symbolically, the five golden rings stood for the first five books of the Old Testament. Six geese a-laying signified the six days of creation. Seven swans a-swimming represented the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and mercy. Another version of this story says that the seven swans are the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: baptism, the Eucharist, reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, Holy Order, and anointing the sick. This means that all of the first seven gifts were birds representing various aspects of Scripture or teaching.

The "eight maids a-milking" stood for the eight beatitudes Jesus mentions in His famous Sermon on the Mount, where He provides blessings for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

The original song then differs in the order of the gifts given. Originally it was nine drummers drumming, ten pipers piping, eleven ladies dancing, and twelve lords a-leaping. But, in keeping with the catechism, they were changed.

The nine ladies dancing embodied the nine fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; characteristics that would cause us to be joyful and allow our spirit to dance. The ten lords a-leaping were the Ten Commandments. The Eleven pipers piping represented the eleven faithful disciples. And the twelve drummers drumming stood for the twelve points of the *Apostles' Creed*.

Other scholars have claimed that ascribing such meaning to the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* is purely urban legend. Neither side really has enough historical evidence to support its view. But rather or not the song contained such a code is not as important as how *we* view it. By applying these meanings we have brought a deeper-spiritual meaning to what on the surface seems like a silly song. Perhaps on the twelve days following Christmas you can use this time, and this song, to reflect on the greatest gift of all and how much our true love cares for each and every one of us.

December 25
Was Jesus Born on December 25?

It stands as the most important date on the world's calendar. But is it correct?

The date of December 25 shares the birthdays of English scientist Sir Isaac Newton, Red Cross founder Clara Barton, millionaire Conrad Hilton, bandleader "Cab" Calloway, and singer Jimmy Buffett. But was Jesus Christ actually born on this date? The answer is that we do not know.

In the Gospel of Luke we are told that shepherds were in the fields at night keeping watch over their flocks when the angel of the Lord appeared to them to announce the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8-9). But the Bible does not tell us what time of year this was, or on what day Jesus was born.

Most scholars point out that December is too cold for shepherds to be in the fields at night. Others have argued that December would be the time when shepherds were in the fields close to the cities so that they could find shelter when extreme cold set in. Otherwise, they would have been further out in the desert. But the Bible itself gives no indication as to what time of year the shepherds were in the Bethlehem fields.

So how did we come up with the date of December 25? Some have argued that early Christians wished to make an impact on the pagan Roman society in which they lived. The Romans celebrated the winter solstice and church leaders wanted to make the most of this event as an attempt to Christianize the world around them. In other words, the Son of God would be worshiped instead of the pagan sun god.

Others argue that December 25 is considered the birthday of Christ because it comes nine months after March 25. There were scholars in the early Christian Church that believed Jesus was crucified on March 25. They also believed that Old Testament prophets died on either their birthdays or the day they were conceived. So, some thought, if Jesus was conceived on March 25, then nine months later would be the day of His birth.

Regardless of the reason, history tells us that in the late fourth century Pope Julius made December 25 the official day to celebrate the birth of Christ. From that point on people have taken time each year to remember the message the angel gave the shepherds so many years ago: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

This Christmas day take some time to thank God for the greatest gift ever given to the world. As your heart reflects on this wonderful truth, perhaps you too can join the angels in their praise of "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).