

D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 3

# CHRISTMAS & HOLIDAYS

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## The Origins of Santa Claus



Santa Claus started out as Saint Nicholas. He was born around the year 300 in what is now Turkey. He was a rich and kind man who was also a Christian and stories say that he helped many people, especially children.

Over time St. Nicholas became associated with giving gifts and his story got mixed up with a Norwegian legend of a magician who punished bad children and rewarded good children with gifts.

In 1823 a poem called " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas" was published. In this poem Santa is described as flying in a sleigh pulled by reindeer and climbing down chimneys to leave gifts for children.

In the 1940s a poem called "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was written about a reindeer with a glowing nose who helped Santa deliver gifts in bad weather.

In modern America, Santa has become a happy, fat, old man in a red suit who lives at the North Pole and gives presents to children. Though many parents tell their children that they need to be good or Santa won't bring them any gifts on Christmas eve.



## \* Secular & Sacred \*

*Sacred* - considered to be holy and deserving respect, especially because of a connection with God.

*Secular* - not having any connection with religion.

### THE SECULAR SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

**Santa Claus** – He is a fictional (made up) older man who lives at the North Pole. All year long he and his helpers (elves) make Christmas gifts for children and he delivers them in a sled pulled by flying reindeer on Christmas Eve. He enters homes through the chimney and leaves gifts for good children and coal for bad children. Many children write letters to Santa or visit him at a shopping mall to tell him what they want for Christmas.

**Lights and Outdoor Decorations** – many people decorate the outside of their homes with lights and Christmas figures.

**Stockings** – Stockings (socks) are traditionally hung near the fireplace of a home and filled with little gifts and treats. Many stores advertise small gifts as "stocking stuffers".

### Why Decorate Trees?

Plants that remained green all year have a special meaning for people in the winter. Ancient peoples hung evergreen branches over their doors to keep away

evil spirits and anticipate the return of spring.

Germany started the Christmas tree tradition in the 16th century when Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. In 1846, the popular royals, Queen Victoria and her German Prince, Albert, were sketched in a newspaper standing with their children

**Food & Parties** – Family and friends get together to exchange gifts and eat special food such as Christmas cookies. People usually spend Christmas Eve (December 24<sup>th</sup>) and Christmas Day (December 25<sup>th</sup>) with family members. Parties with coworkers and friends happen on other days in December.

**Christmas Cards** – Friends and family send cards and letters to each other in the mail before Christmas.

**Christmas carols (songs)** – People like to hear songs about Christmas over the holidays. Some people get together to go "caroling" which means they go from door to door and sing songs.

around a Christmas tree. Victoria was very popular and what whatever she did immediately became fashionable both in England and America.

In the early 1900s many Americans decorated their trees with homemade ornaments, while German-Americans preferred apples, nuts, and cookies.

## Christmas Quiz

True or False?



1. In America, only Christians celebrate Christmas and others do not celebrate this holiday.
2. Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>.
3. Stars, angels, lights, candles, decorated evergreen trees and wreaths are used to decorate for Christmas.
4. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a perfect woman.
5. Santa Claus is the same person as Jesus.
6. Orange and black are popular Christmas colors.
7. A group of soldiers and farmers visited Jesus and his parents after he was born.
8. It is very important to spend a lot of money on Christmas gifts.
9. Many people send Christmas cards and letters to friends & family in December.
10. Some Christmas traditions include singing songs and going to special church services



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### THE SACRED SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

#### **What is Christmas all about?**

**Short answer:** Christians believe the God who created everything chose to be born as a human (Jesus). Christians celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Long answer:**

- Approximately 2000 years ago in what is now the country of Israel, an angel appeared to a young, unmarried woman named Mary and told her she would have a baby, though she was a virgin.
- An angel appeared to a carpenter named Joseph (he and Mary were engaged) and told him to marry Mary though she was pregnant.
- Because of a census imposed by the Romans (they ruled Israel at this time), Joseph and Mary traveled to another

town (Bethlehem) where Joseph's ancestors had lived.

- Mary gave birth to her baby (Jesus) in a stable in Bethlehem because there was nowhere else to stay.
- An angel told a group of shepherds about Jesus and they visited him.
- Later, a group of wise men from the east who studied the stars traveled to see Jesus and his family.

#### **How Christians celebrate**

**Christmas today:** Christians focus on the sacred side of the holiday by attending church services, listening to music about Christmas, reading the Christmas story with their families, and even using special calendars or wreaths.

**Symbols of Christmas:** stars, wise men, shepherds, sheep, donkeys, angels, stable, lights.

### Why celebrate on December 25?

The first mention of December 25 as a holiday honoring Jesus' birthday appears in an early Roman calendar from 336 A.D.

But was Jesus really born on December 25? Probably not. The Bible doesn't mention his exact birthday, but the presence of shepherds and sheep

suggest a spring birth. When church officials chose December 25, they likely wanted the date to coincide with existing pagan festivals honoring Saturn (Roman god of agriculture) and Mithra (Persian god of light). That way, it became easier to convince Rome's pagan subjects to accept Christianity as the empire's official religion.

The celebration of Christmas spread throughout the Western world over the next several centuries, but many

Christians continued to view Epiphany and Easter as more important. Some even banned its observance because they viewed its traditions—the offering of gifts and decorating trees, for example—as linked to paganism. In the early days of the United States, celebrating Christmas was considered a British custom and fell out of style following the American Revolution. It wasn't until 1870 that Christmas became an official holiday.