

All Things Christmas

By

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INTRODUCTION

Hello My Friend and welcome to this study of All Things Christmas. We've tried to make it as interesting and informative as possible. It's been my experience that even though we've celebrated Christmas all our lives, there is still much that can be learned about the lore, legend and reality of this most important holiday.

Surprisingly enough, this holiday which has been so stereotyped and commercialized was not even celebrated by the earliest of Christians. Each year we hear the plea to return Christmas to its religious roots. Though most everyone agrees that to do so would be a good thing, no one seems to know how to go about accomplishing the task. My suggestion would be to focus on the one part of the equation that is under our control...what happens in our own homes.

Peace and Blessings,

E. G. Lewis

Chapter One **Advent Wreathes and Calendars**



The Basic Advent Wreath

Over the years the celebration of Christmas has been nearly overwhelmed by the onslaught of commercialism directed at us from every side. As Christmas begins to draw near, many parents look for a way, or ways, to prepare the children of the household for the big day and, in process, direct these young minds toward the spiritual meaning of the holiday rather than its more commercial aspects.

While there are many things parents can do to accomplish this, two of the most common approaches are the Advent Wreath and/or an Advent Calendar. For those unfamiliar with the term, Advent (coming from the Latin word *adventus* meaning coming) is a liturgical season observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas.

With a history dating back to the Middle Ages, the Advent Wreath is steeped in symbolism. It has four candles, one for each of the four Sundays before Christmas. A fifth white candle is often added in the center of the circle and burned during the twelve-day Christmas season. Many stores sell pre-made wreathes along with a set of candles. For the more adventurous, it can be an easy do-it-yourself project.

The wreath itself can be as simple or elaborate as desired. Some people use circles of Styrofoam, or florist's oasis, as the underpinnings of their wreath. Wreathes can just as easily be

made using a square of plywood with holes drilled at each corner or candle holders attached at those positions and in the center, if desired. Once the wreath is covered in greenery, it assumes a round shape regardless of its base.

The traditional colors for the Advent candles are purple and rose. Because of its long association with royalty, purple candles symbolize the coming of the Prince of Peace. The single rose candle is lit during the third week of Advent beginning with *Gaudete* Sunday (from the Latin word for rejoice) to celebrate having reached the half-way point of the season. Some Protestant churches prefer to use four red candles, reflecting their use in Christmas decorations, along with a white one at the center.

The wreath is covered with various evergreens, each having its own symbolism. The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering, pine, holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism. Its prickly leaves serve as a reminder of the crown of thorns. The circular shape of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Children may want to add pine cones, nuts, or seedpods to decorate the wreath as symbols of life and resurrection.

The following are a suggested, though not required, series of prayers to be used with the Wreath. Each night you may want to accompany them with a short Bible reading.

On the First Sunday of Advent, a parent blesses the wreath, saying: "O God, by whose word all things are sanctified, pour forth Thy blessing upon this wreath, and grant that we who use it may prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ and receive from Thee abundant graces. Amen."

Each day of the first week of Advent, the youngest child lights one purple candle and the family prays: "O Lord, stir up Thy might, we beg thee, and come, that by Thy protection we may deserve to be rescued from the threatening dangers of our sins. Amen."

During the second week of Advent, the oldest child lights the purple candle from the first week plus a second purple candle and the family prays. "O Lord, stir up our hearts that we may prepare for Thy only begotten Son, that through His coming we may be made worthy to serve Thee with pure minds. Amen."

During the third week of Advent, the mother (or another child) lights the two previously lit purple candles plus the rose candle and the family prays, "O Lord, we beg Thee, incline Thy ear to our prayers and enlighten the darkness of our minds by the grace of Thy visitation. Amen."

During the fourth week of Advent, the father (or another child) lights all of the candles of the wreath and the family prays, "O Lord, stir up Thy power, we pray Thee, and come; and with great might help us, that with the help of Thy grace, Thy merciful forgiveness may hasten what our sins impede. Amen."

For the twelve days of Christmas, light the white candle and pray, "God of love, Father of all, the darkness that covered the earth has given way to the bright dawn of your Word made flesh. Make us a people of this light. Make us faithful to your Word that we may bring your life to the waiting world. Amen."

The Advent Calendar is a more modern innovation that many families enjoy. Like the wreath, the calendar can be as plain as a series of numbered squares of paper or cloth hung in the shape of a Christmas tree, or as fancy as wooden cabinets or houses with doors and drawers for each day. Part of the Advent Calendar's popularity lies in its versatility. It can be structured to convey a religious message for the Christmas season, or like the one below, take a more secular approach.



Cloth Calendar with Candy in its Pockets

In either case, the calendar counts down to Christmas as the child turns over a tag, opens a little door, or reaches into a pocket to discover a small hidden treasure. Stores sell cardboard ones with paper doors that open to reveal a picture.

Some people insert candies while others put in small plastic or felt nativity figures. Each day another figure is removed from that day's pocket, door, box or envelope, etc. One day a lamb or an angel is revealed. On another day a shepherd or a Wise Man. This continues right up to the day before Christmas, or Christmas day itself. By then the child has assembled the complete scene, baby Jesus and all.



A Decorate It Yourself Calendar Set

Felt figures can be attached to an adjoining board. The solid figures can become ornaments to be hung on the tree or used to assemble a separate nativity scene in a small crèche. A corresponding portion of the Christmas story can be read for that day's nativity figurine until it is completed on the last day.

One of the most important parts of parenting is creating memories. If used properly, both the Advent Wreath and/or an Advent Calendar will create family traditions and happy memories for your children that will last a lifetime.

Chapter Two **THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHT, or CHANUKAH**



A Priest Fills the Menorah with Oil

Although the two festivals have no relationship to each other, the Jewish Festival of Chanukah and the Christian celebration of the Christmas season often overlap so it seems appropriate to include Chanukah in a study of Christmas. In the Jewish calendar of Feasts and Festivals, Chanukah, or the festival of lights, begins on the eve of Kislev 25, and lasts eight days. It is the newest of the Jewish Feast and Festivals in that it was first celebrated in 165 BC. In 2010 Chanukah occurs between December 1st to December 9th. In 2011: December 20th — 28th 2012: December 8th — 16th 2013: November 27th — December 5th and 2014: December 16th — 24th.

Chanukah celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, purity over adulteration, spirituality over materiality. It memorializes events recorded in the Biblical Books, 1 & 2 Maccabees.

The Chanukah story begins with Alexander the Great. Following his untimely death, his Empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy, for instance, took Egypt and most of the Holy Land. Seleucius took the adjoining area north and east of Ptolemy's which included central Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Persia, today's Turkmenistan, Pamir and parts of Pakistan. Much of the eastern part of the empire was conquered by the Parthians under Mithridates I of Parthia in the mid-2nd century BC. Seleucid kings continued to rule from Syria until their eventual overthrow by the Roman general Pompey.

About 170 years before the birth of Christ, the Jewish nation was ruled by the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV called *Epiphanes*, meaning "Manifest of God," although the historian Polebius, gave him the epithet *Epimanes*—madman— because of his cruelty. He tried to impose

Hellenistic beliefs upon the Jews. He removed their High Priest and installed his own man, Menelaus. He then marched on Egypt. When Rome overpowered Antiochus in Egypt, a rumor spread that Antiochus was dead. The former high priest, Jason, raised an army and led the people in a rebellion, driving Menelaus him out.

Enraged by his defeat, Antiochus attacked Jerusalem and restored Menelaus. He ordered his soldiers to cut down anyone they met and to slay those who took refuge in their houses. They massacred young and old, killing women, children, and infants. In the space of three days, eighty thousand were lost. Forty thousand met a violent death, and an equal number were sold into slavery.



Channah Laments her Seven Sons

2 Maccabees tells the story of Channah and her seven sons who were arrested and taken before the king. One-by-one, he ordered the sons to abandon their religion and one-by-one they refused and were killed. As they took the last boy away Channah told him, “Tell your ancestor Abraham, ‘You bound only one son upon an altar, but I bound seven.’”

The story of Yehudit is told in the Book of Judith which is read in every Synagogue during Chanukah. Her city came under siege by a huge Seleucid army. Rather than starve to death, the people appealed to their leader to surrender. The Jewish leader asked for five days of prayer before he decided whether or not to surrender. Meanwhile, Judith, a young widow, went to meet with the general. He invited her to dinner and she fed him her homemade cheese and wine. He got drunk and passed out. In an act reminiscent of David and Goliath, she cut off his head with his own sword, put it in her picnic basket and took it to the leader of the Jews. The soldiers panicked when they realized their general was dead and the Jews defeated this army.

Judah was the third son of Mattathias, the Hasmonean, a Jewish priest from the village of Modiin. He and his brothers led a rebellion against the Seleucids. He was a great general and defeated Antiochus’s armies though often greatly outnumbered. For this reason people began to call him Judah Maccabeus, or *Judah the Hammer*. When the war was over, he and his family ruled the country for the next 100 years. His descendents are often referred to as the *Maccabees* or the *Hasmoneans*.

Once the Maccabees were victorious, the Jews set about to purify the Temple that the

Hellenists had defiled. When they entered the Temple, however, they could find only one jug of oil with the high priest's seal of purity still intact. Worse yet, there was only enough oil in the jug to last for one day. Regardless, they used it to light the menorah and this one day's worth of oil miraculously burned for the full eight days of the purification. This miracle has been celebrated ever since as the Festival of Light, or Chanukah.

Chanukah commemorates an oil-based miracle, which explains why Jews eat oily foods to commemorate it. Some eat fried potato pancakes known as *latkes*, while others eat *sufganiyot*, deep-fried doughnuts. It is also customary to eat cheese since one of the greatest victories resulted from Judith feeding the enemy cheese.

During Chanukah it is also customary to give *gelt* (money) to children, so they can be taught the value of charity. During the Hellenistic oppression, the Greeks outlawed Torah schools, so the children had to study in the forests. They posted a sentry to alert them of patrols, and when the alert came, the children would hide their texts and start playing with *dreidels* (spinning tops).

By playing with a *dreidel* children commemorate the courage of those heroic children. A dreidel is four-sided top with the letters *nun* ן *gimmel* ך *hay* ה and *shin* ש carved on its sides, which stand for the words *nes gadol hayah sham*—A great miracle happened here.

Each day of Chanukah Jews recite the complete Hallel in their morning prayer service. They also insert a special prayer of thanksgiving, *V'al Hanissim*, in the prayers and Grace after Meals. Every morning they read from the Torah about the inauguration offerings brought in honor of the dedication of the Tabernacle—reminiscent of the Maccabean re-dedication of the defiled Temple.

On Friday afternoon, the menorah is lit before lighting the *Shabbat* candles. The Friday night Chanukah candles must burn for at least 1½ hours. On Saturday night they light the menorah after dark following the *Havdallah* ceremony which concludes the Shabbat.

Chapter Three ***Laganum Fructus – A Christmas Fruitcake***



Making Fruitcake with the Youngsters

Fruitcakes are traditionally served during the Christmas season and so I decided to whip up an ancient fruitcake as a yuletide treat. It's called *Laganum Fructus*, which is Latin for *Cake of Fruit* or *Cake with Fruit*. Fruitcake was quite popular with the soldiers of Rome's Legions. It was aged with wine and the alcohol preserved the cake and prevented spoilage. Consequently, a Legionnaire could pack his *laganum fructus* into his *loculus*, a traveling pack or duffel bag, and count on the cake keeping until he finished snacking on it.

This recipe calls for some aging, so it's best to make it well ahead of when you plan to serve it. Now let's get something straight. It doesn't matter whether you love fruitcake or hate

the thought of the stuff; gather the kids together and make one anyway. It's a good way to make the Biblical era real to your children. As you can tell from the picture above, we gathered a Christian Education Class for a fruitcake making demonstration.

There are two distinct styles of fruitcakes, cakey and fruity. The recipe definitely leans to the fruity side of things. That is, it's a lot of fruit held together with a little bit of dough. The recipe for this fruitcake consisted of four primary ingredients: pomegranate seeds, pine nuts, dried fruits, and barley flour. The first hurdle you'll encounter is how to soften pomegranate seeds to the point where they can be chewed without the risk of breaking a tooth. An easy way to circumvent this is to substitute pomegranate juice, and that's what the recipe calls for.

Most of the pine nuts sold in the grocery stores are imported from China and are very often bitter. The best pine nuts are harvested in the mountainous regions of Nevada and New Mexico. They aren't in stores, but can be ordered direct over the internet. If you're a stickler for authenticity, by all means order some. They make wonderful eating. However, they are harvested in the Fall and typically aren't ready for shipment until Thanksgiving or later...although you can pre-order. They also sell out pretty quickly, so don't delay.

A cheaper alternative would be to substitute slivered almonds. This is a legal replacement since almonds were available in that part of the world in the 1st Century. In addition to eating the nuts out of hand and cooking and baking with them, they also pressed the nuts for their oil and made almond milk, which they used for cooking.

Ingredient list along with comments:

1 C olive oil

1 C honey

1 C pomegranate juice

4 eggs

2 C barley flour

1 C wheat flour...if you want to be authentic use whole wheat flour

2 tsp salt

2 tsp ground cinnamon

1 tsp nutmeg

1 tsp baking powder...This is an easy, but illegal ingredient. The only leavening available in the 1st Century was natural yeast. They would have mixed some of their starter into the barley flour.

1 C of pine nuts

1 ½ C raisins

1 ½ C chopped dates

3 C mixed dried fruit...Equal amounts of apples, plums (prunes), and apricots works well. Citron is a legal ingredient. If desired, you may add some diced, candied citron. Adjust the quantities of the other fruits proportionally.

Optional: Rose water, wine, grape or apple juice for basting

Directions: Heat oven to 275 degrees. Grease two 8 1/2" x 4 1/2" loaf pans and line them with parchment or wax paper. Sift all dry ingredients together and set aside. Dice the fruit small, mix in a bowl and set aside. Combine oil, eggs, pomegranate juice and honey. Alternately add portions of the dry ingredients and the oil mixture to the fruit, mixing well each time. When batter is complete, pour it into the prepared pans. Bake for 2 ½ to 3 hours. Begin checking for doneness with a toothpick after 2 ¼ hours. Let stand 15 minutes before removing from pans.

Do not remove paper. When thoroughly cooled, carefully remove paper and wrap the loaf in cheesecloth soaked with any of the basting ingredients. Enclose in plastic wrap and then in foil and store in the back of the refrigerator for 2 weeks.



Basted Fruitcake in its Cheesecloth Shroud

For our demonstration we doubled the above recipe and baked the cakes in bread pans. It yielded four loaves.

The Final Analysis

As you can see from the photo at the beginning of this chapter, we took our show on the road and prepared *Laganum Fructus* for the youngsters at a Religious Education Class. I want to emphasize that this was done as a teaching tool, a way for these young people to experience a reasonable facsimile of what people may have eaten 2,000 years ago. Obviously, our goal was to make something that tasted good, but we felt accuracy should trump tasty.

So how did it turn out?

To be brutally honest, the cakes were okay, but hardly great tasting. The cake is heavy on *dark* fruit...raisins, dates, and prunes and, for the sake of authenticity, we used whole wheat and barley flour. The combination of these two factors yielded a dark cake with a strong, but not particularly sweet flavor. Part of the problem, I believe, is that our modern taste buds are accustomed to a much higher level of sweetness than the ancient one. What tasted sweet and good to them seemed a coarse and dry to us. We served the cake with Cool Whip so the children could supplement the taste a bit.

This in no way means the experiment/demonstration was a failure. Whether the cake was of blue ribbon quality or not, it was a success because we replicated something that they would never have otherwise experienced. I encourage you to pursue this recipe with the same goal in mind.

Chapter Four

SAINT NICHOLAS versus SANTA CLAUS

Saint Nicholas versus Santa Claus. Hmm, sounds a bit like a promo for an upcoming event on the Wrestling Channel, doesn't it? Let's take a closer look...

Bursting with excitement, the announcer says, "Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen. You've tuned into the smack-down of the century, a match made in heaven. At the end of this evening only one man will remain standing. Who will it be?"

The announcer continues as the camera focuses on a slim wrestler in gold trunks as he stretches and tests the ropes. The white robe he's wearing has a gold crown on the back. "Here

we have the perennial champion...St. Nick. They used to call him *Jolly old St Nick*, but we haven't seen that famous grin of his lately. With his popularity tanking I guess he doesn't have much to smile about. Even the church ladies have sworn off Nick. I guess times change and today's favorite can be tomorrow's has been. I can't help wondering if he's bitten off more than he can chew tonight. Could this be the match that forces him into permanent retirement?"

Loud cheers and shouts interrupt the announcer. The sound of people stamping their feet reverberates throughout the arena. The camera quickly switches to the opposite corner of the ring where an overweight man in a red spandex suit, mask and cape is climbing through the ropes.

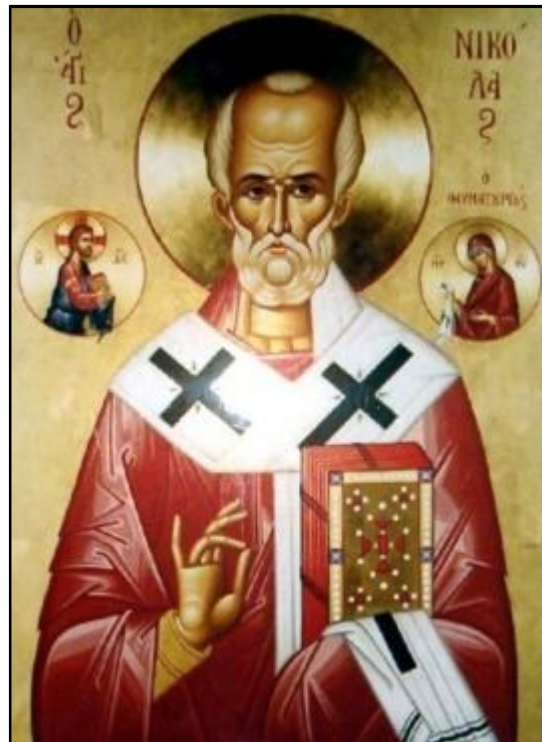
The announcer must shout to be heard over the crowd. "There he is, folks. This is what the crowd's been waiting for...the man who thinks he can unseat Old Nick. The crowd is going crazy. Listen, they're chanting his name. In all my years I've never seen anyone as wildly popular as Mr. C. They say he flew in especially for this match. This Mr. C is more than just a wrestler; he's a juggernaut...an overwhelming force."

The retired wrestler who provides color commentary leans close to the mike. "Sure he's popular, but we know nothing about this Mr. C character. I mean, it's like he's been created out of thin air by the media. Who, or what, is hiding underneath that mask and red suit?"

The announcer shook his head and smiled. "He's a man of mystery, all right. No one knows anything about him, but for some unexplainable reason they love him anyway."

The bell rings and the two men step forward to meet with the referee at the center of the ring.

* * *



An Icon of St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas was born in 271 and died around 342 or 343 near the town of Myra in what was called Asia Minor, present day Turkey. At the time of his death, Nicholas served as Bishop of Myra. The story of how he achieved that office is an interesting one. During the last official Christian persecution by the Roman Empire, the bishops from the surrounding cities and villages

were called together to choose a successor when the Bishop of Myra died.

Nicholas made it a habit to rise early and go to church to pray. That morning an elderly priest greeted him when he entered the sanctuary. "Who are you, my son?"

"Nicholas the sinner," the young priest replied. "And I am your servant."

"Come with me," the old priest said.

Nicholas followed him into a room where the bishops had assembled. The elderly priest addressed the gathering. "I had a vision that the first one to enter the church in the morning should be the new Bishop of Myra. Here is that man, Nicholas."

Nicholas ended up leading his congregation through the worst, and last, official Roman persecution of the Church. Diocletian had been Emperor for 19 years when he began a widespread persecution of Christians in the year 303. Diocletian left office two years later, but his successor, Galerius, continued the harassment.

Nicholas was exiled and imprisoned during this period and only returned to his diocese in 311 when the Edict of Toleration ended the persecution. Two years later in 313 Constantine's Edict of Milan made Christianity a legal religion. Nicholas is also said to have participated in the Council of Nicaea in 325, although his name is not listed among the attendees.

Nicholas was a friend to the poor and helpless while serving as Bishop. Following the admonition of Christ that "when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret;..." (Matthew 6:3), he moved about the city aiding the poor and needy without anyone knowing it.

The story is told of three young girls whose father couldn't afford their dowry and they weren't able to marry. Nicholas tossed a bag of coins down their chimney so that they would have the necessary dowry without knowing where it came from. By coincidence the girls had hung their stockings from the mantel to dry and Nicholas's sack ended up in one of the stockings. This legend led to children in many European countries leaving their shoes on the hearth or hanging stockings on the mantle on the eve of St. Nicholas' Feast Day, December 6th.

In addition to aiding children in need or distress, Nicholas is also said to have rescued innocent men who were falsely imprisoned. He became known as the friend and protector of all in trouble or need. He was said to be able to calm raging seas and rescue sailors in peril, causing his fame to spread throughout the Mediterranean area.

Centuries after his death, his bones were transported by sailors to Bari, a port in Italy. A monument was constructed over his grave and the town became a destination for those intent on honoring him. His fame eventually spread around to the Atlantic Coast of Europe and the North Sea making St. Nicholas day part of the European Christmas holiday tradition. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century slowed, but never completely eradicated St. Nicholas traditions and observances of his comings and goings.

He traveled to America with Dutch colonists who settled in New York and called him *Sinterklaas*. In 1809 American author, Washington Irving, took the first step that eventually morphed the saintly Bishop into the blatant marketing tool known as Santa Claus. Irving's satirical *Knickerbocker's History of New York* made frequent reference to a jolly St. Nicholas-type character who was an elfin Dutch burgher with a clay pipe.

More damage was done in 1823 when a poem called, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, was published. Better known by its first line, *'Twas the Night before Christmas*, it tells the story of a man who awakens to noises outside his home and sees St. Nicholas arrive in a sleigh pulled by eight reindeer...all with names. Interestingly, the stockings had been hung by the chimney with care in the hopes that St. Nicholas would soon be there...not on December 6th, but on December 25th! He was dressed all in fur, no doubt to protect him from wind chill while flying about in an

open sleigh. His eyes how they twinkled, his dimples how merry...His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry. His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow, and the beard of his chin was as white as the snow. He was chubby and plump, a right jolly pipe-smoking old elf.



A Thomas Nast Portrait of St Nicholas

During the Civil War, political cartoonist Thomas Nast did a series of drawings for Harper's Weekly magazine based on the descriptions found in the poem and Washington Irving's work. For the first time, Santa moved into the arena of public opinion letting it be known that he supported the Union cause. Nast continued drawing Santas until 1886. More than St. Nicholas' appearance changed during the 20 odd years that Nast did his drawings. His name, which had been the Dutch *Sinterklaas* or German *Sankt Niklaus*, changed into the Americanized phonetic approximation, Santa Claus.

It didn't take long for this new Santa Claus to become decidedly commercial. Dozens of artists competed with each other producing Santas in a wide variety of sizes and shapes. By the 1920s the standard American Santa had emerged. A rotund, normal-sized man, instead of an elf, he had a flowing white beard, wore a fur-trimmed red suit, and though seldom seen with his pipe, continued to travel from his North Pole residence in a sleigh pulled by reindeer.

In short order this new Santa became a shameless shill. He willingly hustled any and all products no matter how silly or mundane. If you want Marilyn Monroe, James Dean or Elvis Presley in your ad, even though they're dead, it'll cost you an arm and a leg. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck aren't even real people, but you'll still have to pay them a royalty. Meanwhile Santa Claus, who retains just enough of a saintly persona to make him marketable, comes free of charge.

Devoid of scruples and free for the taking, Santa Claus became the ultimate pitchman. Not even a saint can compete with that...as if St. Nicholas cares. The latest word is he's decided to give up the wrestling circuit and enjoy a leisurely retirement spent occasionally visiting churches or answering prayers when and if he's invited to do so.