

WHAT IS CHRISTMAS?

Christmas is the season during which Christians everywhere give thanks to God the Father for the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. This joyous cycle begins on December 25, the Festival of the Nativity of our Lord, more commonly known in English-speaking countries as Christmas. Along with Easter and Pentecost, Christmas is one of the three great festival days of the church. Christmas is the climax of a longer liturgical cycle that begins with Advent, continues after Christmas with Epiphany and the Sundays that follow, and ends with Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

WHAT ARE THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS?

Christmas is not a celebration that lasts a single day. Christmas is a twelve-day season that begins on December 25 and ends on January 5, the eve of the Epiphany of our Lord. These "Twelve Days of Christmas" are in turn part of a longer liturgical cycle that begins with Advent, continues after Christmas with Epiphany and the Sundays that follow, and ends with Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

WHAT DOES THE WORD "CHRISTMAS" MEAN?

The modern English word Christmas comes from the Old English *Christes Maesse* (Christ Mass), the name of the service of Holy Communion that commemorates Christ's birth. Familiar names for Christmas in other languages -- *Navidad* (Spanish), *Natale* (Italian), *Natal* (Portuguese), and *Noël* (French) -- are derived from *Dies Natalis*, Latin for "Day of the Birth."

WHY DOES CHRISTMAS FALL ON DECEMBER 25TH?

While Scripture contains many details about Christ's nativity, it does not record the exact date of His birth. However, ancient documents show that the Christian community in Rome began celebrating the Lord's Nativity on December 25 starting around the year A.D. 336. No one knows for sure why the early Roman Christians chose December 25, but the most widely held explanation is that they appropriated the already existing winter solstice festival honoring the pagan sun god, Mithras. This popular festival was known as *Natalis Solis Invicti* or "Birth of the Unconquered Sun." According to this theory, Christian leaders in Rome chose December 25 to turn people away from the pagan Unconquered Sun and toward Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness ([Malachi 4:2](#)). This connection to the Roman sun cult has led some contemporary Christians to reject the celebration of Christmas as pagan and sinful. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that the choice of December 25 was based on attempts by early theologians to calculate the date of Christ's birth. The article [Calculating Christmas](#) by William J. Tighe discusses in detail this explanation of the date of Christmas.

WHAT IS THE LITURGICAL COLOR FOR CHRISTMAS?

White, the color of joy, holiness, and light, is the proper liturgical color for the Christmas season. Red, the color of martyrdom, is generally used for the festivals of Saint Stephen and the Holy Innocents (see below).

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF SANTA CLAUS AND THE CHRISTMAS TREE?

The Santa Claus tradition is based on the life of a Christian bishop of the fourth century, Nicholas of Myra, whose feast day occurs on December 6th. Christmas trees seem to have originated in medieval Germany. These two are possibly the most popular and recognizable symbols of our society's non-religious celebrations during Christmas. The following excellent articles by Dr. Richard P. Bucher contain detailed information about many of the best known secular Christmas traditions: [The Origin of Santa Claus and the Christian Response to Him](#), [The Origin and Meaning of the Christmas Tree](#), and [The Christmas Customs FAQ](#).

WHAT IS THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS?

Christmas is the church's celebration of the Incarnation, the supreme mystery that the holy and

almighty God took on human flesh and was born in this world of the Virgin Mary. God became one of us in order to die for us and save us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. A mystery this profound can't be contemplated in just one day. This is why the church pauses during Advent to prepare for the Lord's coming. This is also why Christmas extends for a period of twelve days and leads directly into the breathtaking festival of the Epiphany, the day and season the church sets aside to ponder the many ways Christ revealed Himself to the world as God Incarnate.

Besides Christmas, there are other December festivals that help believers recall the true meaning of Christ's birth. The three days immediately following Christmas Day are sometimes called [Witness Days](#). December 26 honors [Saint Stephen](#), Deacon and Martyr, the first Christian to die for his faith ([Acts 7:54-60](#)). December 27 is the Festival of [Saint John](#), Apostle and Evangelist. John was the disciple whom the Holy Spirit inspired to write the gospel lesson appointed for Christmas Day, the beautiful words that summarize the miracle of the Incarnation: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...* (see [John 1:1-18](#) for the complete text). December 28 is a memorial to the [Holy Innocents](#), the baby boys of Bethlehem who were murdered by King Herod in his insane attempt to exterminate the Christ-child ([Matthew 2:16-18](#)). On the surface, these festivals have little in common with each other or with Christmas Day. However, each of these days helps us better understand the true meaning of Christmas. Saint Stephen willingly gave up his life to preach the gospel of Christ. The Innocents of Bethlehem were martyred without their choice. The apostle John endured persecution and exile for the sake of the gospel. These three days remind us that it is precisely because of the ugliness and magnitude of our sins that Christ had to be born in to the world so that he could live, suffer, and die for all people. The Witness Days also remind us that the lives of Christians will sometimes be touched by hardship and misery, and that Satan and the world are enemies to the saving message of the gospel. But in spite of our sins, the devil's machinations, and the world's sorrow, Christians are able to rejoice in God's Son, Jesus Christ, born two thousand years ago in Bethlehem to die for us.

Another special commemoration takes place on January 1, the [Eighth Day of Christmas](#). Eight days after the Lord's birth, Mary and Joseph had Him circumcised as required by Jewish law. At His circumcision, He was also formally given the name *JESUS* ([Luke 2:21](#)). The significance of this day is twofold. First, circumcision was the visible sign of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants ([Genesis 17:1-13](#)). In the cutting of flesh and the spilling of blood, we see a prophesy of Christ's death on the cross for the sins of the world and the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to bless the children of Abraham. Second, we receive yet another glimpse of the true meaning of Christmas in the name *Jesus*, which means "He saves." As recorded in Matthew 1:20-21, an angel spoke these words to Joseph concerning the child that Mary was carrying in her womb: *Joseph... do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

Christmas trees, Santa Claus, decorations, exchanging gifts, and the many other seasonal traditions that most of us observe are wonderful ways for family and friends to mark this time of year. What we must all take care to remember is that these customs, enjoyable as they are, ultimately have nothing to do with the true meaning of Christmas. The true meaning of Christmas -- the "reason for the season" -- is found only in the message of the gospel. Here it is, so beautifully encapsulated in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

Special thanks to [SAINT PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH 12022 Jerusalem Road Kingsville, MD 21087](#) for the above summary of information.