

# The CITYGATES C H U R C H

## Advent 2022 The Culture of Christmas

Summary: What do Santa, reindeer, and Christmas trees have to do with Jesus in a manger?

We have been reflecting on Advent, that's Latin for arrival or coming. Traditionally it has been a season when the Church remembers the coming of Christ, the long-promised Savior spoken of by the prophets. We remember that Jesus was Immanuel, God with us. Fully God and fully man born to a virgin in Bethlehem. He was crucified, dead, and buried, but rose again from the grave. Today He is in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father watching over us. Remembering that He has come should remind us that He will come again to judge the world and draw His people to Himself. These simple facts are agreed upon by Christians of all denominations everywhere, throughout time, around the world.

And yet, there are a lot of other things happening at Christmas that no Christian from the past would recognize because two things are happening each December in the West: while the church is celebrating Advent the culture attempts to celebrate a commercial holiday and the two are often mashed together in strange ways producing all sorts of feelings in us.

Most of us have seen the famous cartoon *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It's become a classic since being released on December 9, 1965. Yes, 1965. That was 57 years ago.

And yet, even back then, Charlie Brown dealt with the same kind of frustration we feel today. As the cartoon opens Charlie Brown confides to his good friend Linus:

*I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.*



I wonder how many of us understand Christmas? The season is loaded with symbols and stories and traditions, but it can be hard to make sense of it all at times. What does Jesus have to do with Santa, Rudolph, and Frosty the Snowman? Where did all these things come from?

This morning I'm going to try to sort some of that out. At times it may feel more like a history lesson than a sermon. I apologize for that, but I think it's important stuff for us to know as we try to navigate Christmas in a way that remembers Christ has come and Christ is coming again.

We'll begin with the question: is Christmas something we should even celebrate at all? Because, there's a lot of confusion out there. Is Christmas a Christian holiday that has been hijacked and commercialized by the mall or is it a pagan holiday that Christians need to be aware and cautious of? The answer is: it's both.

Here's what I mean. The first recorded celebration of Christmas was in 336 in Rome.<sup>1</sup> That's 300 years *after* Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. In other words, the Church was very quick to celebrate what we might call Easter today, but slow to celebrate Christmas.<sup>2</sup>

It was only as Christianity became more established in the Roman Empire, that Christians sought to redeem pagan celebrations by replacing whatever they could with a Christian element. So "Saturnalia" and other pagan celebrations marking the passing of the winter solstice were replaced by "Christmas"<sup>3</sup> and as the faith spread further into Europe it began to absorb a more "wintery" feel as Christmas trees, holly, mistletoe and the yule log were all adopted from local pagan traditions and added to the "Christmas" celebration.<sup>4</sup>

So, what are we to make of all this? We're saying Christians took pagan holidays and symbols and used them to celebrate the birth of Jesus? *Can you do that?* Is that OK?

Well, if you think about it, that's actually how we live the majority of our Christian life. As children of God living in a fallen world we constantly wrestle with the question – how do I do this thing that everyone else is doing, and yet do it in a way that honors God? How do I redeem my marriage, my hobbies, my grocery shopping, my everything?

We have to ask ourselves: what would Jesus do if He worked at my job? Or what would He do if He was the father of my toddler or teenager? In other words, how does God want me to act in this situation so that I walk with integrity and He is glorified?

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, "Christmas," John Bowker, Ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001). The date appears on the Philocolean Calendar. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (see Christmas) offers a much earlier date however going back into the early third century.

<sup>2</sup> *EDT 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, "Christmas." The early church didn't celebrate the birthday of Christ regularly until the late fourth century and even then, it was celebrated on different dates in different locations.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, "Christmas," Walter Elwell, Ed. (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *EDT 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, "Christmas." Included in this list of additions are the yule log, holly, mistletoe, and the Christmas tree.

So, what *are* you celebrating this Christmas? Is it the birth of Christ and everything that means? Are you remembering that He has come and He will come again? Are you remembering Immanuel, that God is with us? Or are you celebrating a pagan cultural event full of winter-themes, holiday parties, and a big fancy meal? What's this really about *for you*?

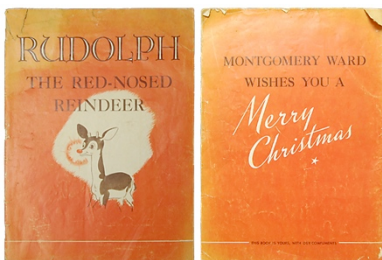
Friends, the truth is, it probably depends on what day you ask the question. Doesn't it? We live in a world that loves our Christmas, but isn't so committed to our Christ. And it's easy for us to get caught up in what Christmas has become – to feel rushed, stressed, and downright greedy at times, isn't it?

We feel stressed about getting the tree up and the house decorated, we wonder how we're going to fit the office party into our calendar, and what we're going to wear. We worry about what we're going to buy for this or that person, and of course, we start wishing and wanting and downright lusting at times for the things we *hope* people get for us. There's no doubt that the celebration of Christmas in modern America has almost completely lost Christ but just keeps growing in mass.

But let me ask: if we were to start cutting things out of Christmas to calm it down and make it a little more manageable, when we would have to stop before it didn't "feel like Christmas" to you anymore? Could you do without Christmas parties? Or the decorations at the mall? What about Frosty the Snowman? Could you live without Christmas music? *What do you have to have in order for Christmas to be Christmas?*

Well, let's consider some of the common elements and ask: where did they come from, and do they help us or distract us in our celebration of Christmas?

We'll begin with Rudolph – you can't have Christmas without Rudolph, right?



Well, actually, you can. Robert Mays invented Rudolph in 1939 while working in advertising for Montgomery Wards, a then-famous department store. He wrote Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer as a promotional book to draw customers in. If you came to the store – you got the book. Friends, I hope you don't miss what I just said: Rudolph was added into Christmas by a store trying to make more money!

Now, that doesn't mean you have to stop singing his song, or pull that big bushy red "nose" off your minivan, but isn't it interesting to see how easily materialism can creep in and seem like it's always just been part of the tradition? In reality, people celebrated Christmas for over fifteen hundred years without Rudolph.

And what about Santa, doesn't Rudolph help pull his sleigh? Where did he come from, aside from the North Pole, of course?

Well, actually it has nothing to do with the North Pole – quite the opposite really. Santa comes from the Mediterranean and probably had a really nice tan, brown eyes, and black hair. Way back in the fourth century, that’s about 1700 years ago, Nicholas of Myra was a pastor in part of what we now call the country of Turkey. He was known as a fierce defender of church doctrine, but also for his kindness to children; he’s especially remembered for an act of kindness to three young girls who needed a dowry in order to marry. He was eventually canonized by the Church and came to be known as Saint Nicholas.

Now, in the Catholic tradition Saints all have feast days assigned to them and Nicholas’s day happened to be December 6<sup>th</sup> and for centuries Christians in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands observed this day by giving gifts to children often leaving them in their shoes, which led to the tradition of Christmas stockings.<sup>5</sup>

And it was in the Netherlands that a very important thing happened with language. They speak Dutch there of course, and in Dutch Saint Nicholas is Sinterklaas. Which if you try to repeat in English sounds an awful lot like Santa Claus – the name that eventually stuck.

But what we think of Santa has been shaped by a few important events over just the past two hundred years. On December 23, 1823 the poem *’Twas the Night Before Christmas* was published anonymously in a newspaper in Troy, New York, telling people, for the first time, that Santa was a heavyset old man with eight tiny reindeer. People liked the poem, and the ideas stuck.



Then forty years later, in 1863 the cartoonist Thomas Nast – the same man who gave us the political idea of Republicans as elephants and Democrats as donkeys, drew a bunch of pictures of Santa Claus for the popular magazine Harper’s Weekly. Because so many people read the magazine, his drawings quickly became the image we all think of when we hear the name Santa Claus. Nast is also responsible for moving Santa Claus to the North Pole and giving him a workshop full of elves.

Later, in the 1930’s the Coca-Cola Company<sup>6</sup> began using Thomas Nast’s version of Santa Claus as the inspiration for its holiday advertising, and now practically everyone knew Santa was a large, jolly man with a big white beard. It’s kind of convenient that both Santa and Coca-Cola are known for their red and white colors, isn’t it? I don’t mean to be too cynical but the co-branding here is thick.



<sup>5</sup> Ott, Michael. "St. Nicholas of Myra." [The Catholic Encyclopedia](#). Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 28 Nov. 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Coca-Cola incidentally, was also the advertising sponsor for A Charlie Brown Christmas.

Are you starting to notice how much of *what we think of as Christmas* are really additions brought in by, or made more popular by, businesses with something to sell?

Now, I want to be clear: I don't want to be the Grinch. I don't want you to go home and throw all your Santa stuff in the trash – I hope instead that you'll see through Santa and remember "Saint" Nicholas of Myra, and you'll think of a man who took truth seriously and was kind to children, and you'll remember he did that *because of what Christ meant to him*.



Well, in all our modern stories, Santa comes and leaves gifts under *the Christmas Tree*. So what about those, where did they come from? Well, the tradition of the Christmas Tree has its strongest roots in Germany where they were endorsed by Martin Luther<sup>7</sup> and appear in literature dating back to 1605 at Strasburg.<sup>8</sup> But they didn't become *really* popular until a certain wedding occurred.



In the 1800's, Prince Albert of Germany married Queen Victoria of England. Up to that point, most English families would bring a sprig of evergreen or holly into their home at Christmas, but Albert brought with him the German tradition of having an entire tree indoors. And in 1848 a picture was published in a London newspaper showing the royal family gathered around a Christmas Tree inside Windsor castle. Well, we've always been obsessed with the rich and famous and if it was good for them, it obviously must be good for everyone else. So, the tradition caught on rapidly and spread like wildfire around England and then across the Atlantic to America.

There's nothing inherently spiritual or religious about the Christmas tree, it's just a part of the decoration, it's not for Christ or against Him. But just like Santa reminding us of a saint, the Christmas tree can help us remember what Christmas is really about by reminding us of the role trees play in the Gospel.

Think of the role a tree played in the Garden of Eden – the tree that Adam and Eve ate from when they turned their back on God. He had commanded them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they were tempted and did what they wanted to do instead.

We call that sin, and their sin suddenly separated them from God. They intentionally did something God had said no to. And that's something every single man, woman, and child in this room is guilty of too. The Bible says:

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<sup>7</sup> Grant, George and Gregory Wilbur. *Christmas Spirit*, (Cumberland House Publishing: Nashville, TN, 1999), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Martindale.



**Romans 3:23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Ironically, even some of the things we're hoping to receive at Christmas might be things that will pull us away from God. Left to our own desires, most of us become increasingly self-centered over time. And the Bible clearly teaches us that:

**James 1:15** ...when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

We break God's rules and then we must live with God's consequences.

But here is the absolutely amazing thing – God doesn't just leave it at that. Scripture teaches

**Romans 6:23** For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Yes, we have done wrong, and yes there are consequences, but if we will recognize that and admit it – He has actually provided a way for us to escape the consequences because they've been fulfilled by Someone else.

In order to restore our relationship with God, He sent His son – Jesus to earth. He was famously born to Mary, a young virgin girl who was engaged to Joseph, an insignificant carpenter. They lived in Nazareth, a place most people looked down on, but traveled to Bethlehem to meet a government requirement. And while they were there, she gave birth. Not in the hospital, not in a marble palace, but on a dirt floor.

There's another common part of Christmas that helps us remember the event. We call it a Nativity Scene or a crèche. It all started with St. Francis of Assisi in the year 1223 in Italy. Francis staged a living nativity in a cave and conducted a Midnight Mass with carols sung by friars in order to teach illiterate and uneducated people the story of Christ's birth.<sup>9</sup> So Nativity scenes are great – the wise men don't really belong there, they didn't arrive until later, but it's nothing to lose sleep over - the point is they help us remember why we call it CHRISTmas.



And as you know, the baby 'born in a manger' grew up as something the world has never known before or since – He was fully God, and yet fully man at the same time. He lived a perfect life – never once choosing to do anything except the Father's perfect will. And after about 32 years, He was falsely accused, wrongfully imprisoned, and sentenced to die a criminal's death on the cross – an instrument of death made from the bones of a dead tree. In the garden of Eden Adam and Eve ate from a tree that brought death, now Jesus would hang from a dead tree to bring us life.

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<sup>9</sup> Martindale; *Christmas Carols for Friends and Families*, Adrienne Tindall, Ed. (Darcey Press: Vernon Hills, IL, 1995), 84-2.

And because of that sacrifice – because He was willing to be beaten, pierced, and despised in order to forgive us our sin – those who come to Him, admit their sin, and ask for forgiveness of it, will be welcomed into God’s family and granted eternal life.

The Bible tells us when we leave this body, we will be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8) – we will be with Him in Heaven forever. And it is there, in Heaven, that we find another tree. On the very last pages of your Bible, in the very last chapter, you’ll read about the tree of life - a tree that brings healing to the nations. From a tree in the Garden, to the timbers of the cross on Calvary, to the tree in Heaven that we will eat from one day – trees play a prominent role in our Christian faith.

So put up a Christmas Tree. Make it big. String it with lights and garland. Hang decorations all over that thing. And when you look at it – appreciate its beauty – but remember, in most cases, it’s dead. Either it’s a fake tree and it was never alive in the first place, or it’s dead because it was cut off from its roots. But Jesus gave His life on a dead tree to make it possible for us to see the tree of life – in Heaven with our Father.

Of course, if you read the whole book of Revelation one of the things you notice about Heaven is there’s a lot of singing going on there. Singing has always been an important part of the Church. Even on the night before He was crucified, in the Upper Room when Jesus instituted Communion, the Bible tells us they sang a hymn before leaving for the Garden of Gethsemane.

So, it should be no surprise to you that singing is a part of Christmas. Much like the first nativity scene, the first and best Christmas Carols were written to help us tell and remember the story of Christ and probably date back to the first church celebrations of Christmas in fourth century.

We have Christmas carols in French and German dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and in English dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christians staged Christmas pageants or parades – playing music and singing songs on carts drawn through town.<sup>11</sup> And as a little bonus information: If you’ve ever wondered what on the earth the “Twelve Days of Christmas” are about, they actually refer to the “twelve days” between Christmas and Epiphany – an event celebrated by Catholics and Orthodox Christians on January 6.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Martindale.

<sup>11</sup> For example the Coventry Pageant of the Church of Coventry referenced in *Christmas Spirit*, George Grant and Gregory Wilbur, pg 110.

<sup>12</sup> Martindale, Cyril Charles. "Christmas." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. 28 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>>. The twelve days were first recognized as special by the Second Council of Tours (can. xi, xvii) in 566 or 567

The best of the carols teach us and remind us of our theology and doctrine and are simultaneously musically beautiful and moving. They hit us in the head and move us in our heart. If you need help putting together a list of really good ones we've built a playlist of songs that will "feel like Christmas" and remind you of what's it's really about.



Which brings us back to where we started – with a Charlie Brown Christmas. Over fifty years ago, Charlie was feeling a little frustrated and confused about Christmas and all its trappings. And finally, in a fit of frustration he cried out: *Isn't there anyone, who knows what Christmas is all about?!*

And Linus responded: *Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about. Lights please?*

And then he quoted **Luke 2:8-14**, which was a pretty big deal, even back then:

8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

14 "Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

And then Linus looked over and said, *"That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."*

Friends, that is still what Christmas is all about – God came to be with us so that one day we could be with Him. It's a fact worth celebrating.

But along the way a lot of other things have crept in and sometimes they try to choke out what we should really be focused on. So let me encourage you - push back against Commercial Christmas – see through the symbols to what they represent and let Advent be a time when you remember what God has done, what He is doing, and what He has promised to do for all those who come to Him in Christ.

Let's pray.

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## **Advent 2022**

### **The Culture of Christmas**

Summary: What do Santa, reindeer, and Christmas trees have to do with Jesus in a manger?

- What makes Christmas feel like Christmas for you?
  - What parts are hard? What parts could you live without?
  - What parts do you love?
  - Have your feelings about Christmas changed over the years?
- The Church has always celebrated Easter, but it hasn't always made a big deal about Christmas. Why do you think this is?
- What are some ways that you try to stay focused on Christ while surrounded by all the trappings of a cultural and commercial Christmas?
- There are parts of Christmas that Christians can receive, embrace, and enjoy, there are parts that we must reject, and there are other parts we need to work to redeem.
  - Which parts fit in which category for you: receive, reject, redeem?
  - How is this a helpful categorization for responding to everything else in the culture? What else can we receive, reject, or redeem from the world we live in?