

CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

Written for Saginaw First UMC by Amy Terhune, 12/6/2020

Using information gleaned from: <https://www.whychristmas.com/cultures/>

John 1:1-5, 14: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

ICELAND – Anthony Ashmall

In Iceland, Christmas is often known as 'Jól' (pronounced "Jole"), which translate to "Yule" in English. This comes from the ancient winter solstice celebrations, that were taken over by the early Christians. In Iceland at Christmastime, there is only light for about 3 hours each day, and so Christians gather to celebrate that Jesus is the light of the world. Evergreen trees are not native to Iceland, so many did not have Christmas Trees until about a century ago, which the city of Oslo, Norway began gifting a very large tree to stand outside the Reykjavík (pronounce Ray-kee-ya-vic) Cathedral every year.

Celebrations start in Iceland at 6.00pm on Jól Eve. This may have come from old Icelandic tradition, when a new day started at 6.00pm not midnight. There is a simple meal, presents, and Christmas Eve Worship by candlelight.

On Christmas Day, there is a great feast of roast lamb. Another Jól meal specialty is 'Laufabraud' or leaf bread. This is made of thin sheets of dough cut into delicate patterns and fried. Each family often has their own patterns for the Laufabraud.

Christmas Celebrations in Iceland go through the New Year and on until January 6, which is Epiphany, or the day the wiseman visited Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus. They are often intermingled with Pagan festivals from old Nordic and Icelandic culture. But one unique tradition that Christians adopted many centuries ago in Iceland is to decorate cemeteries with lights at Christmastime, as a reminder that the Christ child will ultimately free us from sin and death by the power of his resurrection.

Isaiah 2:3b-4: For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples. Then they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

CHINA – Stacy, Hailey, and Meredith Sharrow

In China, only about one percent of the people are Christian, even though Christianity is one of five sanctioned religions in China. There are many churches in China, but they may face censorship or government interference. For this reason, some Christians in China meet illegally in private house churches. On Christmas Eve, Christians in China often gather for Midnight religious ceremonies.

Although many of the world's Christmas decorations and pre-fab trees are made in China, not many individual Chinese households have such things. Instead, many decorate with Chinese lanterns and paper flowers. They remind them that Jesus is the light of the world.

A tradition that's becoming popular on Christmas Eve is giving apples. Many stores have apples wrapped up in colored paper for sale. People give apples on Christmas Eve because in Chinese Christmas Eve is called "Ping'an Ye" (平安夜), meaning peaceful or quiet evening, which has been translated from the carol 'Silent Night'. The word for apple in the Mandarin language is "píng-guǒ" (苹果) which sounds a lot like the word for peace. On Christmas Eve, as Chinese Christians gather for at church buildings or private home churches, they pray for peace for the world and in their hearts, and they give thanks for Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who was born to save us all.

SONG: "Chinese Lantern Carol" – Bryan Latimer, Piano/Vocals

arr. Jacqueline Hanna McNair

Tiny hand strike tiny chime! Children walk in a row;
Journey make at Christmastime, like so long ago.
To the manger hurry to him, footsteps over the snow;
How to find small Bethlehem? Lantern star will show.

Bow to gentle Mary mild, bow to Joseph, so.
Light my lantern for this child born so long ago.
Would my Christmas lantern glow as the star did then
Bringing peace to earth below, and goodwill to all.

All your worry, hunger, and pain be forgotten to night;
Jesus born on Bethlehem plain so the world may be bright.
God, from whom all blessings flow, children near and far,
Make your loving spirit glow like the lantern star!

*Isaiah 40:9-11: Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion! Herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength; do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah: "Here is your God!"
¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might... ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

RUSSIA – Nic Courier

For much of the 20th Century, the government in Russia forbade religious celebrations such as Christmas. For that reason, New Year's became a popular feast day of celebration instead.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, people were free to celebrate Christmas again. Like the people of other Eastern Orthodox traditions, Christmas is celebrated on January 7 in Russia. Today, the New Year's celebrations remain the most popular day for feasting and celebration, and so Christmas is a quieter celebration that is much more religious and private. It begins on November 28th with a 40 days season of Advent. Much like Lent, it involves fasting and repentance.

Like others, Russians have Christmas trees and manger scenes. Father Frost visits the children, and Babushka, an old and saintly woman, delivers presents to children. Kolyada, a young woman dressed all in white, goes from house to house on a sled to sing carols.

On Christmas Eve Day, Christians may not eat anything until the first star has appeared in the sky. Then they gather to eat 'kutia' – a porridge made from wheat or rice served with honey, poppy seeds, dried fruits and nuts. Kutia is sometimes eaten from one common bowl to symbolizes unity and the bonds of Christian love. They may also share in a time of family prayer and song. In the times when Christmas was outlawed, many Russian Christians did not have access to the scriptures, and so one of the oldest members of the family would tell the story of Jesus' birth from memory.

In more modern times, families are free to attend midnight worship. It has become tradition to leave the dishes until they get home, sometimes in the middle of the night.

On Christmas Day, many Russian Christians eat a meal consisting of 12 dishes, representing the 12 disciples of Jesus. After the meal, 'Uzvar' is served. Uzvar is a sweet drink made from dried fruit, berries, and honey served steaming hot. Uzvar is traditionally offered at the birth of a child, so at Christmas it symbolizes the birth of Jesus.

Isaiah 49:8-9, 13: Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, ...⁹saying to the prisoners, "Come out," and to those who are in darkness, "Come to the Light"... ¹³Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

GERMANY – Olivia Wagner

In Germany, today – December 6 – is the Feast of Saint Nikolaus. On this day, German children hope that Saint Nikolaus will have left chocolates in their shoes if they place them near the front door the night before. It's also a day that children write to the 'das Christkind' asking for presents. The letters to the Christkind are decorated with sugar glued to the envelope to make them sparkly and attractive to look at. Children leave the letters on the windowsill during Advent.

'Das Christkind' translates as 'The Christ Child' in English but Germans don't think of the Christkind as the baby Jesus! The Christkind is often described as a young girl with 'Christ like' qualities of compassion for the poor and deep faith in God.

Advent is an important time of preparation. Most Americans don't realize how many of our Advent traditions, such as lighting the Advent Wreath, enjoying an Advent Calendar, or putting up a Christmas tree, actually came to the United States through German settlers, not the English. During Advent, Christian families in Germany light the Advent wreath each night and share in prayer and singing together, as well enjoying chocolate from their Advent Calendar. They set up creche scenes under the tree instead of presents. On Christmas Eve, many go to worship, and on Christmas Day, they share a great feast to celebrate Jesus' birth.

On the 12 days following Christmas, German children may get together in groups of four and go from house to house as Stars Singers, dressed as the three wiseman and one carrying a star on a stick. They sing carols to collect money for charity, to help those less fortunate in the name of Jesus.

SONG: "Still, Still, Still" – Bell Choir with Terry Moon, soloist
by Norman Luboff; arr. Catherine McMichael

Still, still, still – One can hear the falling snow
For all is hushed, the world is sleeping
Holy Star its vigil keeping
Still, still, still - One can hear the falling snow

Sleep, sleep, sleep – 'Tis the eve of our Savior's birth
The night is peaceful all around you
Close your eyes, let sleep surround you
Sleep, sleep, sleep – 'Tis the eve of our Saviour's birth

Dream, dream, dream of the joyous day to come
While guardian angels without number
Watch you as you sweetly slumber
Dream, dream, dream of the joyous day to come

Luke 2: 1-7 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

ETHIOPIA – Jena Maturne

Like most other Christians from the Eastern Orthodox traditions, Christians in Ethiopia celebrate Christmas on January 7th, not December 25th. The Ethiopian Calendar has different months - and Christmas in on the 29th of Tahsas. The Christmas celebration in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is called Genna. Tradition has it that one of the wiseman came from Ethiopia, but Ethiopians don't exchange gifts on Genna. Instead, it is a time for worship, feasting and playing games all together as a whole community.

Many people take part in a special Advent fast during the 43 days before Christmas. It starts on the 25th of November and is known as the 'Fast of the Prophets'. During this time, traditionally only one vegan meal is eaten each day, since people fast from meat, dairy, eggs and wine.

For Genna, people get dressed in white. Most people wear a traditional garment called a Netela. It's a thin white cotton piece of cloth with brightly colored stripes across the ends and is worn like a shawl. On Christmas Eve, people go to church around 7:00pm but the service often doesn't finish until about 3:00am on Christmas Day.

In Church, the people sit in circles instead of pews. The choir sings from the outer circle. Everyone who goes to church for the Genna celebrations is given a candle. The people walk around the church three times in a solemn procession, holding the candles. They then go to the second circle to stand during the service. The center circle is the most important and holy place in the church and is where the priest serves Holy Communion.

On Christmas Day, if the harvest has done well, the people have a great feast, and then play games in the town square. If the harvest has not done well, or there is political unrest as there is this year, the people still gather for games, but may eat a more modest meal.

HYMN #242: "Love Came Down At Christmas"

- 1) Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.
- 2) Worship we the Godhead, Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus, but wherewith for sacred sign?
- 3) Love shall be our token; love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and all men, love for plea and gift and sign.

Luke 2:8-14: ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among God's people."

PERU – Andy Wagner

Because Peru is in the southern hemisphere, Christmas takes place during the summertime, and so Peruvians celebrate with sunshine and bright flowers instead of snow and sleigh-bells. There are no Christmas Trees in Peru. Instead, many have an altar to Mary and Jesus right in their own home, which is decorated with candles and flowers. Most people also have a Peruvian Creche, called a 'Pesebre' made by the Quechua Tribe. The Quechua have been making these elaborate creche scenes the same way since the 1500s. These Pesebre can be very large and elaborate. Sometimes they will have native Peruvian animals in them like llamas and alpacas! Traditionally the figure of the baby Jesus isn't put into the scene until Christmas day.

In the run up to Christmas, there are special events called 'chocolatadas' where people meet to see each other and drink hot chocolate and eat some 'panetón' or Christmas Cake. Chocolatadas started as a way of sharing some food and gifts with people who were less fortunate at Christmas, and many churches and community groups still have chocolatadas for this reason. But they are also popular as a way of seeing family and friends.

In Peru, the main Christmas celebrations are held on Christmas Eve which is called 'Noche Buena', which means 'the good night'. The streets are flooded with people walking to a special church service called the Misa de Gallo (or Rooster Mass) which normally start at 10pm on Christmas Eve.

After the mass the main meal is normally eaten. This is called the 'cena de Navidad'. The main food at the meal might be roast turkey, chicken or pork with salads and other dishes like tamales.

At midnight there's lots of toasting the start of Christmas day with champagne and/or hot chocolate and then people like to go into the streets to wish their neighbors, friends and family a Merry Christmas and there are often lots of fireworks and caroling as a way of remembering the angels song to frightened shepherds in the middle of the night when Jesus was born.

Song: “Noel Nouvelet” – Nathan Bieber, Violin and Catherine McMichael, Piano
arr. Catherine McMichael

Luke 2:15-20 ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Read by Isabelle Terhune

PAKISTAN – Elise and Eva Paulus

In Pakistan, December 25th is a public holiday, but not for religious reasons. There are about 5 million Christians in Pakistan, which is a very small part of the population there. Most Christians in Pakistan are not all that different from Mary and Joseph – they live in the countryside or small towns, and are quite poor.

In Christian areas, each house is decorated and has a star on the roof. The Christmas tree is also an important decoration, and there are lots of lights. In many Christian areas, carol singing is performed by various groups during the last week of Advent. They go from house to house singing carols and in return the family offers something to the choir. The money collected from caroling is used for charity works or is given to the church to help others.

Christmas there is often called 'Bara Din', which means the 'Big Day'. On Christmas Eve, people process through the streets to the Cathedral. Churches are packed for the midnight worship. The choirs sing Christmas hymns. After the mass, there may be fireworks which help celebrate the start of Bara Din. People dance, exchange presents and enjoy the special night. On Bara Din (or Christmas Day), Christians go to Church again for worship, wearing their best, colorful clothes. They can stay in the Church courtyard for hours, enjoying various food from the different stalls. The evening is usually celebrated with immediate family or relatives, enjoying more feasting, dancing, games, and prayer together.

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