



# Bringing Home the Word

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 20, 2015

## Waiting in Haste

By Janel Esker

I love short work weeks. Monday holidays make the rest of the week fly by even though I'm forced to cram five days of work into four.

Does the same hold true for you? Maybe your workweek is just three days long and you're wondering how you're going to finish your Christmas preparations, whether spiritual or logistical, so quickly. If so, take a lesson from Mary, who first experienced the transition from Advent to Christmas through her own body. Mary's time of anticipation included a long journey "in haste" to see her also-pregnant cousin Elizabeth. (Many of you can relate to hurried holiday travel.) The joy of the Visitation is palpable, even to pre-born John. Elizabeth's words speak volumes: "Blessed are you who believed that what

was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Mary believed in God and in his word. This trust was the key to her spiritual readiness.

Perhaps, instead of rushing or cramming this week, we need only undertake one Christmas preparation: believing that God keeps his promises. God has promised that we will not be alone, that we need not be afraid. God has promised abundant life, both here on earth and through resurrection. God kept his promise to Mary, and he will do the same for you. †

## Christmas Traditions

By Christopher M. Bellitto, PhD

When, how, and *why* do we celebrate Christmas? If the Gospels can't historically prove a census sending Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, a December twenty-fifth birth, or Herod's slaughter of the Innocents, is it all fantasy or useless? Hardly. Though we can't always take the Word of God literally, we must still take it *seriously*.

Furthermore, whenever and wherever the Gospel was spread, preachers and bishops would adapt the local customs and inclinations to Christian ideas and practices. This process of adapting both respects the wisdom of native traditions and reveals the deeper, fuller truths. Uncovering how these traditions developed is a window to Church history and our faith.

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## A Word From Pope Francis



We are to be God's leaven in the midst of humanity.

It means proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world... The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.

The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture. The concept of culture is valuable for grasping the various expressions of the Christian life present in God's people.

—*Evangelii Gaudium*, 114–115

## Sunday Readings

### Micah 5:1–4

"You, Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel."

### Hebrews 10:5–10

"He takes away the first to establish the second."

### Luke 1:39–45

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."



Lord, your word gives me life, joy, hope, and peace. May your word find a home in me and inspire me to live according to Gospel values.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

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## Celebrating on December 25

The Roman Empire celebrated the winter solstice on December 21. December 17 was a day to honor the sun god Helios and to mark the pagan feast of Saturnalia. In 274, the emperor Aurelian moved the feast to December 25. Since Christianity was illegal, Christians assigned the sun god's day to their son-God: Jesus. Everyone thought they were simply celebrating with them.

After Constantine embraced Christianity, December 25 was officially set as the day to mark Jesus' birth. But in the aftermath of the Reformation, some of the stricter Protestants accused Christmas as being frivolous, a prime example of "empty externals," and distracting from the Sabbath. In England, the Puritans essentially outlawed Christmas from 1642 to 1660. In New England, Christmas wasn't a holiday until 1856. By the later nineteenth century, the influx of Catholic German, Irish, Slavic, and Italian immigrants made enforcement nearly impossible, and Christmas regained its customary celebrations.

## Epiphany and the Magi

December 25 in the Roman calendar was January 6 in the Egyptian calendar; therefore the Holy Land celebrated the Nativity on January 6 until about the year 650. January 6, still called "Little Christmas" in some cultures, came to be known as Epiphany, a celebration of the Magi's arrival (Matthew 2:1-12).

Magi probably designated astronomers. Catacomb scenes depict their presence at or shortly after Jesus' birth, which supports the January 6 date. Some



### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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- How does Scripture reveal Christ's presence to me?
- What answers and promises am I waiting for this Christmas?

historians and astronomers believe the star was really a lineup of several planets occurring in 7 or 6 BC, and scholars are fairly certain that Jesus was not born in "year 0," but in 6, 5, or 4 BC.

## Evergreen Trees and Plants

Before Christianity, Northern Europeans would bring evergreen trees and plants into their homes to survive the long, cold winter. The greenery reminded and encouraged them that life remained

in the midst of death and darkness. In ancient and medieval times, armies or diplomats carried mistletoe, holly, or ivy as a white flag to surrender or negotiate a truce—a natural tie with the Prince of Peace.

Medieval Christians set up trees for morality plays about the Garden of Eden, which applied during Advent because Jesus is the new Adam. Sixteenth-century German Lutherans adapted an older tradition to create Advent wreaths, and Queen Victoria, of German extraction, set up a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle in 1840. By 1848, we find Christmas trees in the U.S., especially among German immigrants.

## Nativity Scenes (the Crèche)

The Nativity was first depicted in Rome as a fresco in the St. Sebastian Catacomb in the late 300s. In the mid-fifth century, Pope Sixtus III elaborately recreated the Bethlehem story when he renovated the basilica of St. Mary Major. Saint Francis of Assisi set up the first "living" Nativity in Greccio, Italy, in 1223. He used a young girl, a newborn baby boy, and live animals to help people see and understand the real conditions under which Jesus entered the world.

## The Big Picture

Our celebration of Christmas is a mixture of cultures spanning history and the entire world. Those traditions not rooted in Christianity have been converted, reflecting the Church's goal to evangelize. As long as they point to the truth of Christmas—that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us—we can hardly go wrong.

## WEEKDAY READINGS

December 21–  
December 26

Mon. Advent Weekday: Song of Songs 2:8–14 or Zephaniah 3:14–18 / Luke 1:39–45

Tue. Advent Weekday: I Samuel 1:24–28 / Luke 1:46–56

Wed. Advent Weekday: Malachi 3:1–4, 23–24 / Luke 1:57–66

Thu. Advent Weekday: 2 Samuel 7:1–5, 8–12, 14, 16 / Luke 1:67–79

Fri. Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Mass at Dawn Isaiah 62:11–12 / Titus 3:4–7 / Luke 2:15–20

Sat. St. Stephen: Acts 6:8–10; 7:54–59 / Matthew 10:17–22