

# CHRISTMASTIDE

The second season of the Christian Year is Christmastide. Some traditions begin it on Christmas Eve and others on Christmas Day. Traditionally, Christmastide is a twelve-day holiday, beginning with Christmas Day (December 25), and running through January 5 (the “Twelve Days of Christmas”). January 6 is then the celebration of the coming of the Magi, and thus initiates the season of Epiphany. In our lectionary, we are following the traditional schedule that preserves the twelve days of Christmas, and therefore sets Christmas Eve as the concluding celebration of the season of Advent.<sup>1</sup>

In importance, Christmastide is one of the two most notable seasons of the Christian year. It is dedicated to the festival of the birth of Jesus Christ and the consequent celebration of the incarnation. Since it was first celebrated, Christmas has always been a time of joy, merriment and exuberance. Its color, consequently, is white.

There is no indication that Jesus was actually born on December 25. In fact, the likelihood is that he was born in April or in May. That can be concluded on the basis that Luke’s account is built around “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Lk. 2:8). December 25 was much too cold and inclement for sheep to be bedding down in the fields; normally, shepherds didn’t take their flocks into the field until April.

Why, then, is December 25 the traditional day for Jesus’ birth? The selection of that date represents a political and social coup on the part of the church.<sup>2</sup> The period between December 21 (the winter solstice) and December 30 was the period of greatest celebration and worship of the sun, both in the Mithraic festivals of Egypt and in Rome. This observance reached its climax on December 25, when the “birthdays” of at least five ancient gods were celebrated. In essence, Christians decided to counter this pagan festival by worshipping the birthday of their god – Jesus, and they so overwhelmed the pagan celebrations that December 25 became a major Christian holiday (“holy day”). In 336 A.D., December 25 was changed in the Roman calendar from *Natalis Solis Invicti* (“the birth of the Sun of Righteousness”) to *Natalis Christus in Betleem Judeae* (“the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea”). Thus, the “Sun of Righteousness” was eclipsed by the “Son of Righteousness”!

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<sup>1</sup> In the medieval church, all twelve days of Christmas were celebrated as a single feast, with only work necessary to preserve life being done. The Twelve Days of Christmas are:

- Dec. 25 – Christmas Day
- 26 – St. Stephens’ Day
- 27 – St. John’s Day
- 28 – Holy Innocents Day
- 31 – Watch Night
- Jan. 1 – Jesus’ Circumcision
- 5 – Epiphany Eve

The remaining days would be feast days or, according to the calendar, the First and Second Sundays of Christmas.

<sup>2</sup> F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 277-278; George Gibson, *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 87-98.

By the latter part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the name given to December 25 was “Christ’s Mass”, stressing the idea that this was a day for consecrating the birth of Jesus in worship and in the celebration of the Eucharist. As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Christmas music and “carols”, liturgies and customs began to be developed. The name for December 25 evolved into “Christmas” by the eleventh century.

Whereas Christmas, as a religious holy day, concentrated upon the worship of the Christ Child, much of the festivals of the formerly pagan solstice carried over into the Christian celebration of Christmas. Thus, for example, the giving of gifts was initially part of the Roman celebration of the solstice. Germany contributed the evergreen tree as a symbol of everlasting life, and its decorations come from the hanging of the body parts of conquered enemies upon these trees. The Druids gave their sacred mistletoe, under which the ill received the kiss of healing from a young virgin. The holly, representing the crown of thorns with drops of blood, came from England. The Yule log, receiving into its flames the hatreds and distrusts of the past year, came from Scandinavia, along with candles burning in the windows to light the way of the Christ child. So one can say that, whereas early Christianity succeeded at “baptizing” the pagan holidays into the worship of Christ, the pagans “re-baptized” Christmas by diverting it into play, sport and finally into commercialism.

The two major events of the Christian Year – Christmas and Easter – are the celebrations around which Christendom is centered. One marks the birth of our Lord, the other his resurrection. One celebrates the incarnation of our God upon the earth; the other celebrates our atonement and rebirth through his death and resurrection. Both celebrate the transformational love of God for humanity, as God acts to give his son for the redemption and liberation of the world.

### **Christmas Day, December 25**

**Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-12**

#### **John 1:1-18.**

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:1-5).

With these dramatic words, the Gospel of John begins its Christmas story. But unlike Matthew and Luke that tells us of the birth of Christ, John tells us about creation itself – and Jesus’ relationship to that creation.

“In the beginning was the Word”. The Gospel of John opens with identical words to Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning”. Through the Hebrew creation story runs a profound theme, repeated eight times (Gen. 1:3-6 and 7, 9, 11, 14-15, 20-21, 24 and 26-30). That theme is “And God said . . . And it was so.”

Genesis tells us that God *spoke* the world into existence. So, John is declaring the same truth. The Word – in Greek, “*logos*,” in Hebrew “*dabar*” – is not just *a* word spoken by human beings. It is *the* word, for the “*dabar*” or “*logos*” is the conduit by which Yahweh invades humanity and writes sacred history into our history. The “*logos*” of God *is* God, the voice of God speaking the creation into life. Without the Word, there is no world!

For whom is this Word intended? The Word, John is telling us, is intended for the world. The Greek word used here for “world” is “*cosmos*”. The *cosmos* is not simply the geographical world – our sphere. The *cosmos*, to the Greeks, was the entire created order, the universe. The Word, John tells us, has entered the “*cosmos*” which God created, bringing to that *cosmos* “life”, “light” and “power”.

But how did the *cosmos* and its people respond? “The *cosmos* did not *know* him.” “His own *people* did not *accept* him.” Rejection of the Word (and therefore of God) occurred at two levels – societally (i.e., the *cosmos*) and individually (i.e., people). The “*cosmos*” and its “people” had refused to come into an intimate relationship with its creator because “darkness” had kept it and its people from the “light”.

However, such rejection of the Word is not universal. “But to all who received (the Word), . . . he gave power to become children of God” (1:12). There are those who have responded to the Word and have become right with God. But how do they do that, John asks?

God’s people are to be shaped around their embracing of the free gift of God’s redemptive love (1:13), and making that “amazing grace” the foundation for their life together. God’s “shalom”, the “*cosmos*” as God intended it to be will come into existence through “all who received him, who believed in his name” and who therefore create together a new community, an alternative society built upon God’s love and grace.

The magnificent prologue of the Gospel of John now rushes toward its climax, as it gives to the reader the essential theme of the remainder of the Gospel of John.

“*The Word became flesh*”. The Word – the “*dabar*” of God, the “*logos*” of God, has become an actual, living human being. The Word “lives” among us within a human being! The Son of God, the enfleshment of the “Word”, is journeying through the human experience, John is telling us, as the personification of “grace and truth”.

But what does John mean by “grace and truth”? What John is doing here is using two Greek words to capture the essence of one Hebrew word – “*chesedh*”. “*Chesedh*” is the depth of God’s love expressed towards us, a love that accepts us as we are and yet calls us to become all that we have the potential that God has created us to be. And now John is telling us that God has “tabernacled” (the actual meaning of the Greek) among us so that we might become God’s people as we live out “*chesedh*” in both our private and public lives and in the very ways we carry out the political, economic and religious functions of our society.

Now the Prologue reaches its climax. It names the “Word”. The “father’s only son, full of grace and truth” is Jesus Christ. “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

God’s “*chesedh*” is not going to come to humanity and the “cosmos” any longer through “Moses” (that is, the Jewish political, economic and religious system). The Law created by God to incarnate God in humanity’s structures has become the exact opposite, for it has become the oppressive system of the first century that is designed to maintain power for the few while holding the populace in economic, political and religious slavery. The “Law” has become so exploitive and dominating that it is beyond redemption.

But “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. God has had to find another way. And that way is Jesus!

What John is proposing here is radically revolutionary. Is he right? The remainder of the Gospel According to St. John is his effort to demonstrate through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the authenticity of what he has here proposed. And it is to demonstrate that authenticity against the landscape of the horrendous oppression of the Jewish and Roman systems! This is the magnificent Christmas story of the Gospel of St. John.

**Isaiah 52:7-10.** “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, rings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns”” (Isa. 52:7).

In a passage that would later be echoed by Paul in his moving description of the preachers of the early church spreading the gospel (Rom. 10:15), that would over a millennium later enter the Anglican liturgy and would then become the text of one of Handel’s best known arias in *The Messiah*, the prophet tells us of the most beautiful sight in the world – the feet of a messenger running with overwhelmingly good news.

This rich Old Testament lesson begins with the description of a messenger running from the scene of a battle with the good news that the general and ruler, Yahweh, has won against the foes of darkness! As he runs, shouting the good news at the top of his voice, the watchmen of Jerusalem, standing guard over the rubble of its walls destroyed by the enemy hear his cry, and respond with a shout of triumph (vs. 8). The people hear the joy of the guards, and so join in with a riotous triumphant shout of victory and of rejoicing “for the Lord has comforted his people” with the news of triumph.

Then, suddenly, behind the shouting, ecstatic messenger comes God himself on his great steed, leading the conquering army. God has returned to the destroyed and devastated city. And he has returned as both redeemer (vs. 9) and liberator (vs. 10) of Israel. God has brought spiritual salvation to his people (vs. 9), and political and economic deliverance (vs. 10).<sup>3</sup> But that

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<sup>3</sup> The political and economic liberation is expressed in the phrase, “Yahweh has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations”. To “bare one’s arm” was a poetic way of expressing a righteous conqueror who, in his conquest, was righting the political and economic conditions of repression that the nation had earlier faced (cf. Isa. 51:9-11).

liberation is not for Israel alone, the prophet declares. It is so “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (vs. 10).

The striking poem that begins the Gospel of John and introduces Christ as the Word and Light of the world is not the first statement in scripture that presents God as political, economic and spiritual liberator and savior for the entire world (that is, “to all who received him, who believed in his name”). What would someday become the magnificent prologue of the Gospel of John initially is given voice in this magnificent prophecy of Isaiah who sees God coming in human flesh to his people, setting them free from the tyranny that had previously oppressed them.

**Psalm 98** seems to be written with our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 52, in mind. That passage described a messenger running from the field of battle with the good news that God, that nation’s authentic king, has conquered the enemy. His message is followed by the blast of the trumpet, and the king himself approaches the city in triumphal procession. The city’s people, of course, go wild with joy, as they praise both their victory as a nation and their God!

This psalm follows a similar pattern to Isaiah 52. It is the words of praise and adoration sung by many upon God’s triumphal procession into their city. It is the actual psalm sung to which the writer of Isaiah 52 alludes. “O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (98:1, 3)!

Actually, there are three dimensions of praise presented in Psalm 98. There is, first of all, the praise that human beings, both as individuals and as a people give to God (vv. 1-3). God’s deliverance is perceived by the people as being a “new thing” deserving of a “new song”. And that “new thing” that God has done is comprehensive in scope. God has acted to bring about a spiritual transformation through his mighty act (“he has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness”, but that transformation is also political (“he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations”) and military in nature (“his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory”). Thus, the great work that God has done in liberating his people has not solely been individualistic (although it has included this dimension of redemption), but is corporate and social as well, transforming the nation’s political and military agenda as well as its spirituality.

But Psalm 98 presents God’s work of human transformation not only as being praised by the people and nation (vs. 1-3). It is also praised by all the peoples of the earth. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord” (vss. 4-6).

By stating that the “joyful noise” that is to be made to the Lord” is to be undertaken by “all the earth”, the psalmist is indicating that this transformation that God is doing is not for Israel alone, but is intended for the whole world. This is clearly stated in verse 3: “all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God”. Thus, what the Psalmist is presenting here is that God’s

salvific work is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it exclusively intended for Israel. Rather, it is “good news of great joy for all the people” bringing shalom “among those whom God favors.”

The third level of praise moves beyond individuals, the people, Israel or even all the nations of the earth. The praise of God for God’s transformative work in our lives and in our societies spiritually, politically and militarily is also to be taken up by nature itself. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (vss. 7-9).

As is particularly intimated in our Gospel lesson for today, even creation itself praises God. Ancient Israelite thinking, like that of the nations around them, envisioned the world set upon chaos (“the roaring of the sea”) that seeks to deny or overthrow God’s dominion. But even chaos itself recognizes the great victory that has been won by God, so that just as humans have been redeemed and civilizations transformed politically, economically and socially by God’s saving work, so even nature is made new again as it becomes the world of shalom that God intended it to be.

Thus, the Psalm ends, “God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”. The world itself – both the natural world and the human-built world – will be governed with *tsedeq* (translated “righteousness”), the Psalmist tells us. And the people will be governed with *mesharim* (translated “equity” or “uprightness”). The nations (and even nature) will be governed by the conquering monarch-God in the new world God is creating, and they will be governed with compassionate and just treatment toward the poor (the meaning of the word *tsedeq*).<sup>4</sup> And the people will be governed by God with *mesharim* or with economic equity, so that everyone shares wealth and “there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). This is the kind of kingdom God is creating as he conquers the forces of chaos and evil, and this is the kind of world in which he invites those who are called by him to live.

**Hebrews 1:1-12.** “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

This Epistle Lesson for Christmas Day is the logical successor to Isaiah’s and the Psalmist’s image of the redeeming, liberating God returning in triumph and of John’s poetic prologue of the creating Word of God being made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth to become redeemer and liberator of the world. The unknown author of Hebrews tells us that God did reveal himself and his saving work to and through the prophets of the past. But now, he has acted in a unique and a definitive

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<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word *tsedeq* didn’t mean what the English word “righteousness” means. “Righteousness” has a sense of acting in a morally right way; *tsedeq*, on the other hand, is always used of nations and people in acting ethically and compassionately toward the poor.

way through God's Son. And with that revelation of the Son, the world has moved from an era of preparation to the era of fulfillment.

Hebrews then goes on to make seven affirmations about the Son – Jesus Christ. And those seven affirmations, considered together, present one of the clearest affirmations of the deity of Christ that appears in the Bible. The affirmations are as follows:

1. Jesus is “the heir of all things” (vs. 2). That is, he is the predicted, anticipated messianic Son.
2. Jesus is the creator of the “worlds” (not just this planet, and not just the solar system, but the entire universe); as the Word, Jesus is the means through which God created the cosmos (vs. 2).
3. Jesus is the radiant “Light” (vs. 2) of God (vs. 2; cf. John 8:12, 9:5).
4. Jesus is the exact representation of God upon the earth (vs. 3), the Greek word used for “exact imprint” being the word for a newly-minted coin taken from its die.
5. Jesus is the one who sustains the world (vs. 3).
6. Jesus is the one who redeems the world from its sin (vs. 3).
7. Jesus is the one who has taken his throne as co-regent at God's right hand and now rules the world as the representative of God (vs. 3).

This is whom God brought to earth as a little baby lying in a manger in a peasant stable in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, watched over by a teen-age mother, an awe-filled father, shepherds among Israel's lowest of the low and the cattle of the field. This is the miracle of redemption, of liberation, of transformation for “those whom God favors” and for the society that they would be called to build (Luke 2:1-14).

“He comes, a Child, from realms on high, He comes the heavens adoring; He comes to earth to live and die, A broken race restoring. Although the King of kings is He, He comes in deep humility; His people to deliver, And reign for us forever”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Barlowe, “Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light”, stanza two. *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986), hymn 129.