
“Trim Up the Tree”

Sunday School Lesson based on the Traditions and Symbols of Christmas



For many people, the Christmas carols turn up and the decorations come out as soon as the Thanksgiving turkey is put away (or perhaps a few weeks before that). Stockings are hung, trees decked out with ornaments, cookies baked, and gifts wrapped. Cars drive slowly down neighborhood streets as kids and adults alike admire bright lights and inflatable lawn characters. It is definitely a joyous and festive season.

Why do we practice all of these traditions, though? Who decided to staple electric lights to a roof or wrap a stairway banister with garland? Where did our customs come from? There are a variety of stories surrounding the symbols of the season, and some of them are intertwined with legend and uncertainty. Some of the methods in which we celebrate come from other countries, and some of them were born centuries ago. Not all of our holiday celebrations originated with Biblical intent. However, we can now enjoy a variety of beautiful and meaningful Christmas representations.

This season is a terrific opportunity to discuss with children the stories behind some of our favorite Christmas symbols. Kids will more than likely question some of the background behind our traditions. We can share the history of symbols, and describe how we can weave our celebrations in with the Gospel. Please feel free to use this information and insight in the ways that best suit your needs. Explore these stories as a part of a lesson or as an entire lesson. You can also browse them for family devotions and conversation starters. You might learn something new, too!

Christmas tradition: Christmas lights

Where did it come from? When did it start, and why do we celebrate with it?

Christmas lights are a beautiful and festive element of the season. During this season we enjoy hanging and admiring lights of all colors, shapes, and sizes. Originally, the custom relates back to a time when people lit candles to decorate homes and Christmas trees. Of course, open flame attached to evergreen branches might not be the safest idea. Fortunately, electricity came along in the 1880s. A man named Edward Johnson (associate of Thomas Edison, who invented the light bulb) is said to have been the first to use electric lights. These began to be more mainstream in the 1930s, when they became a bit more affordable for the majority of



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people. The reason we celebrate with lights at all, though, is to bring to mind the fact that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. In ancient pagan rituals, candles celebrated the light of the sun and continuation of life during dark winter times. For Christians, we recognize that our Savior lights the way in dark times, whether seasonal or spiritual.

How can we connect this to the Nativity Story?

Jesus is truly the light of the world, promised long before His conception. Prophets spoke of His coming and of His relevance as the light to shatter all darkness. At the time of Christ's birth, the people of God were oppressed and downtrodden. They needed hope. The nativity of Jesus represents the fulfillment of God's promises and the advent of hope and life.

Relevant verses:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. -Isaiah 9:2*

*I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I do,
and I do not forsake them. -Isaiah 42:16*

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true),¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Ephesians 5:8-10

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." -John 8:12

Suggested activity:

Watch how Christmas lights string together and connect to one another. When plugged into a power source, they can light up a room by plugging into other strings of lights. We, too, can "string along" with others and share the light of Jesus with those around us.

-Make a string of lights out of paper strips, writing verses on them as you go.

-Use a small glass jar to make "virtual lights" with glitter and glued tissue squares.

-Make an advent candle wreath with real or fake candles.



Christmas tradition: Christmas trees

Where did it come from? When did it start, and why do we celebrate with it?

Using trees as part of winter celebrations is no recent tradition. In fact, thousands of years ago pagans used fir branches to decorate in winter time and remember that spring would again come, and Romans are said to have used trees in temples during their festival of Saturnalia.

Our concept of Christmas trees likely began in Germany in the 16th century. Martin Luther (arguably the father of the Protestant Reformation) may have been the first to bring Christmas trees inside the house, after seeing the stars shining through the branches of a tree out in the woods. There are many legends and stories told surrounding tree traditions. Decorations for trees have included everything from popcorn strings and gingerbread to tiny dolls and flaming candles (not recommended for safety reasons).

However, the wonderful element we can recall comes from the trees namesake, “evergreen.” The trees that we use for Christmas trees do not lose their color or leaves like most trees. Christmas trees survive through the harsh winter months, and that reminds us of the everlasting, never-failing love of God. He will never leave us or forsake us. We can count on His mercy and grace to last forever. Whatever else happens in our lives, He is reliable and constant.

How can we connect this to the Nativity Story?

There would likely not have been many Christmas trees in the Middle Eastern arid land where Bethlehem was located...however, Christmas trees can remind us of Christ’s birth in multiple ways. We recall that God’s everlasting love is responsible for sending Jesus. We also know that the coming of the Messiah fulfilled God’s promises. He keeps His covenants and will never let us down.

Relevant verses:

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. ¹⁹The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. - Psalm 103:17-19

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. -Genesis 9:11-13

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. -Deuteronomy 31:6



Suggested activity:

- Decorate a Christmas tree with “Chrismons”: special ornaments bearing symbols of Jesus and the name of Christ.
- Make a “Jesse Tree” to celebrate the meaning of Advent.
- Look at the parts of trees and what they need to survive and be rooted in good soil.
- Touch, smell, and experience a branch of an evergreen or pine tree.

Christmas tradition: Candy Canes

Where did it come from? When did it start, and why do we celebrate with it?

There is some discrepancy on the exact origin of the candy cane. The first recorded “candy stick” came from Massachusetts in 1837, but it wasn’t until later that the stripes and shape were added. There is a popular legend that a candymaker wanted to create something that children could suck on during a Christmas Eve service. He added the stripes to represent the blood of Christ, and the mint flavor to add an element of bitterness. The crook was meant to be a shepherd’s staff or a “J” for Jesus. While there is debate over the accuracy of these details, the story is a nice one to bring some meaningful joy to this holiday treat. We use them now as decorations, symbols, or just something to suck on!

How can we connect this to the Nativity Story?

As mentioned above, the candy canes can remind us of Jesus in several ways. We also think of the shepherds in the Nativity story, as well as Jesus, the Good Shepherd. These days all sorts of flavor varieties are available, but we can use them all to remember the sweetness of God’s word!

Relevant verses:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. -John 10:11

*But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. -Isaiah 53:5*

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”
-Luke 2:15*

-How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Suggested activity:

- Make a candy cane craft by twisting colored pipe cleaners into a cane shape.
- Play a game of “candy cane crane” using candy canes to pick up other candy canes, and seeing how many can



be hooked into a chain.

-Guess how long it will take to finish a candy cane without biting pieces off (this one could take awhile...might be a take-home project).

-Learn about shepherds, what they do and how they work.

Christmas tradition: Bells

Where did it come from? When did it start, and why do we celebrate with it?

Bells have been used for ages as an element of announcement. In many European churches, special towers held large bells that would ring to notify people of services, warnings, deaths, weddings, and holidays.

As with many winter holiday elements, bell-ringing does contain an ancient hint of paganism. Early noisemakers included bells to ward away evil spirits during celebrations. However, bells quickly gained association with churches. St. Patrick likely used bells to call together people from Irish villages and announce that Biblical teachings would be shared. During the Victorian Era in England, bells gathered popularity in churches, especially at Christmas time. The cheerful tones of bells are too pleasant to only be used for demon-deterrent, and now festively peal in churches to bring people together and honor festivities.

Christmas bells often ring at midnight on Christmas Eve, signaling the arrival of the holiday. Small handbells have been used for hundreds of years to accompany carolers bringing joy to people through song. Of course, who can forget jingle bells, the iconic sound of the season? Interestingly enough, the song “Jingle Bells” was originally written to honor Thanksgiving, but the wintry scenes depicted and widespread use of the carol have made it much more closely associated with Christmas, for good reason.

Today we use bells in songs and celebrations. We ring along with hymns, chime the hour along with clocks, and rattle jingle bells throughout the Advent season. Bells bring us joy and help us raise glad sounds to God, giving thanks for His Son and His work among us.

How can we connect this to the Nativity Story?

Bells not only ring in a holiday and aid in our celebration of Christmas, but also allow us to joyfully make noises of praise to God. We announce His birth during this season and always. Songs and stories connect to this effort of course, and bells provide an extra sparkle of hope and light.

Relevant verses:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!

² *Serve the Lord with gladness!*

Come into his presence with singing! -Psalm 100:1-2

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me*



*to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound... -Isaiah 61:1*

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. -Luke 2:10-11

Suggested activity:

- Use bells or tone chimes to practice along with songs that kids know.
- Brainstorm different types of bells and what they announce (doorbells, school bells, wedding bells, church bells, etc.).
- Find songs or carols that feature bells, and listen to them.
- Use small jingle bells to make necklaces or bracelets as crafts.

Christmas tradition: Presents

Where did it come from? When did it start, and why do we celebrate with it?

Giving presents at Christmas time is another custom that stretches back across centuries. One story of origin goes back to Saint Nicholas, an actual church bishop who was said to have helped poor families. He did this clandestinely, as the legend goes, helping one family by dropping money into stockings that were hanging by the fireplace to dry out. In European celebrations of Saint Nicholas Day, children left shoes or stockings out to receive treats. Some of those traditions merged with other practices when immigrants brought Christmas traditions to the United States. In the 1820's, social elites made efforts to move holiday celebrations from wild street revelry to quieter times in the homes of families. These transitions included giving gifts to children and others in the family. Of course, as department stores gained popularity, commercialism became a component of Christmas upon which capitalism thrived. Now, giving and receiving presents is a large part of Christmas, and unfortunately sometimes endangers our focus on the birth of Christ. It's important not only to emphasize God's gifts to us, but to put our attention outward, teaching children the truth of the statement "it is better to give than to receive."

How can we connect this to the Nativity Story?

Gift-giving and the multiple traditions that surround it can in some ways be said to have originated by the Magi, and their gifts to Jesus. However, we can recognize a much greater gift than gold, frankincense, or myrrh. The most precious gift we receive is Jesus Christ Himself, given to us by God for forgiveness and salvation. The



presence of Jesus is also our present! We recall that as we give presents, remembering that God blesses us with all that we need and more.

Relevant verses:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” -Luke 11:13

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

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. -Ephesians 2:9

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. -James 1:17

Suggested activity:

- Find a way to “adopt a family” or participate in an angel tree project that serves community outreach programs. Teach children the importance of helping others.
- Get creative with gift wrap! In addition to decorating presents, use wrapping paper for crafts and games like “wrap a friend” races.
- Discuss the greatest gifts that people have ever received or given. What makes presents so special?
- Explore gift customs of other times and countries.
- Love languages: not everyone gets a thrill out of presents...sometimes other elements are more meaningful. This Christmas, consider offering time, acts of service, or kind words and letters rather than physical gifts.

However you celebrate this year, make your joy meaningful by focusing on Christ first and foremost. We announce, sing, rejoice, give, receive, bake, and honor because of Him. The Lord fulfilled His promises and always will. He continues to grant us His presence and peace. Glory to God in the highest!





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