



As Christians, most of us are busy getting ready to celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Of course nobody knows exactly which date Jesus was born here on earth, but December 25th was chosen by leaders of the Eastern Church way back around 375 A.D. and was gradually accepted in other countries over the following centuries. If we study more about those early celebrations we find that many of the traditional symbols and practices that we associate with Christmas originally came from pagan origins - such as holly, Christmas trees, Yule logs and so on. Sometimes Christians today have discussions as to whether or not it is right to celebrate with these traditional things - or even celebrate Christmas at all in December!

Maybe it would be good to consider those children (and adults!) around the world who were found as orphans. Mostly, in addition to not knowing who their parents were, they also have no idea when they were actually born! Does that mean they should never celebrate their birthday? Of course not! We know one thing for SURE - they WERE born!! Surely it is better for them to choose a day to remember their birthday every year even if it is NOT the exact day! I believe it is the same with Jesus' birth - we may not know exactly when it happened, but we know for SURE that He was born, so let's celebrate!!



In previous years we have looked at the many different Christian traditions around the world (you can read those PAL pages in the archives of our website www.imofinc.org) Maybe you like to go around the neighborhood and sing Christmas carols; display a nativity scene or perform in a Christmas play; or maybe you live in the Southern Hemisphere and celebrate with a picnic on the beach! The important thing is not to focus on the food or the gifts, but to remember the miraculous story of Jesus' birth which shows God's wonderful love for us all.



Do you know where to read the Christmas story in the Bible? The answer is at the end.

Sadly now in the USA there is a movement to keep the "Holiday Season" yet do away with the Christmas story! TV commercials often say "Happy Holidays" instead of *Merry Christmas*, and often we hear references to other festivities around the same time, so as not to offend people of other faiths or beliefs. We might be led to think that lots of people are offended by Christmas and so we should keep quiet about Jesus. But do you remember



what our Heavenly Father did when His son Jesus was born? Even though no-one knew or cared about Joseph and Mary and their special newborn baby, and it was very dangerous for them because King Herod wanted to kill Baby Jesus, Luke 2:13-14 (NLT) says: **"Suddenly the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.'"** Our Heavenly Father was excited and proud to tell everyone about the birth of His son - and His people have been doing the same ever since!!

Let's have a look at some of the other festivities that are celebrated around the same time as Christmas. Maybe you have heard of **KWANZAA**. This is a week-long African American holiday held from December 26 to January 1. It is not a religious holiday, but a cultural one based on various aspects of the first harvest celebrations widely celebrated in Africa, around the 10th month of the year. But in fact it was only founded in 1966 by Ron Everett, a.k.a. Maulana Karenga, an African-American activist at the California State University! According to a survey conducted in October 2004, only 1.6% of consumers celebrate Kwanzaa, but it is said some 12 million do now.

Probably the other best-known holiday celebrated around Christmas is **CHANUKAH** (or Hanukah) which is a Jewish celebration, this year celebrated from the evening of December 11th until 19th. It is known as the Festival of Light and celebrates the triumph of light over darkness, of purity over adulteration, and of spirituality over materiality. More than 21 centuries ago, the Holy Land was ruled by the Seleucids (Greeks) who had one of the mightiest armies on earth. Against all odds, a small band of faithful Jews defeated them, drove them from the land, reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to the service of God. When they tried to light the Temple's menorah (candlestick), they found only a single bottle of olive oil that had escaped contamination by the Greeks; miraculously, the one-day supply burned for eight days, until new oil could be prepared under conditions of ritual purity. The festival of Chanukah was instituted to remember and celebrate this miraculous event. At the heart of the festival is the nightly menorah lighting: a single flame on the first night, two on the second evening, and so on till the eighth night of Chanukah, when all eight lights are kindled. Chanukah customs include eating foods fried in oil - latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiot (donuts); playing with the dreidel (a spinning top on which are inscribed four Hebrew letters); and the giving of gifts of money to children.



HERE'S HOW YOU CAN PLAY THE FUN, ANCIENT GAME CALLED DREIDEL!



You really need a 4-sided top with the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hei* and *shin*, but you could use dice instead and let the numbers 1-4 represent these letters. Every player begins the game with an equal number of coins (or cheerios or candies). At the beginning of each round everyone puts one piece into the "pot". Every player takes a turn to spin the Dreidel (toss the dice) then follow the instructions below according to the number that it lands on:

- 1 - "*nun*" means "nisht" or nothing - take none and give none.
- 2 - "*gimmel*" means "gantz" or everything - you take it all!
- 3 - "*hay*" means "halb" or half - take half the pieces.
- 4 - "*shin*" means "shtetl" or put in - you must add a piece to the pot.

Read more about celebrating Chanukah at http://www.chabad.org/kids/article_cdo/aid/358959/jewish/Childrens-Chanukah-Guide.htm

Many people around the world still worship nature and the sun, and so **WINTER SOLSTICE** may be celebrated in the Northern Hemisphere around December 21st which is the shortest day (in the Southern Hemisphere this is the longest day). Winter has always been a difficult time for native people in northern countries as there are more hours of darkness and the sun's rays are weaker (as it is further from that part of the earth), but after December 21st when the sun is at its lowest point, the days begin to lengthen again, renewing hopes for the coming Spring. Ancients Greeks, Egyptians and the Incas all had special Solstice celebrations, and more recently Atheists and groups such as Wiccan have begun to organize Winter Solstice parties (probably in opposition to Christmas!).



Many Chinese and East Asians celebrate **DONGZHI FESTIVAL** around December 22nd which is also linked to the Winter Solstice. It is a time when families gather together to make and eat special rice balls such as these "tangyuan" balls in the picture. On December 8th Buddhists celebrate **BODHI DAY** (or Rohatsu) to remember when Buddha achieved enlightenment in 596 BC and escaped the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth through reincarnation. Maybe you have heard of the festival of **EID**, which is celebrated by Muslims

around the world. Actually there are two Eid festivals - **EID UL-FITR** (at the end of the Ramadan fast) and **EID UL-ADHA** about 6 weeks after, to celebrate the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as an act of obedience to God. This lasts 3 days or more and is a time of feasting and meeting with family and friends. However although these may fall in December, it is only occasionally, as the Muslim calendar is based on the phases of the moon and so moves around "our" calendar. In 2009 Eid ul-Adha was celebrated on November 27th.

So, though people may celebrate for many other reasons in December, **CHRISTMAS** is still the most celebrated festivity around the world - and **JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON!** Have a **VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS** - and tell everyone the Christmas Story!

'Til next time, Your friend, Shirley

Answers: Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2 Facts from various websites including <http://www.religioustolerance.org> and www.chabad.org

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