

SIGNS OF THE SEASON



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The *Season of Advent* is a wonderful time of the year not only for what it signifies but also because *Advent* ushers in the *Christmas Season*; the one time of the year when the young and the *young-at-heart* turn their attention to giving: to friends, to loved ones, to those in need.

The *Advent/Christmas Season* is a time of year when harden hearts and pressured agendas are often softened and relaxed as the *hustle-and-bustle* of daily routines suddenly and without warning become tolerable, if not downright enjoyable. Daily tasks and long-term deadlines unexpectedly become a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. The end being a focus on holiday merry-making with family, colleagues and friends.

People *appear*, if for a fleeting moment *or two*, to be less stressed, less anxious, less impatient. Many even appear spirited, more energized and more patient.

During this time of the year, our society transforms itself into a *Santa's*

Wonderland: bells ringing, pine and spruce ablaze with sparkling lights and evergreens decorated with seasonal treasures of all shapes and sizes.

Living in a society that *appears* to have lost sight of its sacred origin, we really need the *Season of Advent and Christmas*. Both *Advent* and *Christmas* provide us with the opportunity and perhaps, the occasion for *breaking-away* from the daily routine to *breathe-in* the *signs* of the season, which point to one person: Jesus Christ.



Many if not all of the decorations that embellish our homes, store fronts, city streets and town greens have a *Christian origin*. The twinkling lights, the glistening garland and the fresh smell of pine and spruce brought in from the out-of-doors and decorated with ribbons and ornaments serve as a reminder that even during the deepest freeze or the darkest days, God is alive and lives in and through His creation.

ST. NICHOLAS

St. Nicholas, also known as *Good Old St. Nick*, *Santa Claus*, *Father Christmas* and *Kris Kringle* is another visible reminder of the season as a multitude of bearded men in red flannel suits flood the shopping malls, stand before store fronts and make merry at holiday parties. In this joyous season, St. Nicholas is not only about *Toys for Tots*, St. Nicholas is about pointing the way to Jesus by a life lived rooted in God's *Word*.



Saint Nicholas is a reminder to men and women of all faiths of the true meaning of Christmas, which is echoed in the phrase, *“Peace on earth, good will toward all.”* The future saint was born in the small village of Patara in Lycia, now Turkey. Nicholas was the only son of very devout Christian parents. At a young age, he learned about God and developed a great love for Jesus and the Church. Shortly before his sixth birthday, both his parents died in an epidemic that swept through this area and subsequently, took many lives.

Unlike other orphans, however, Nicholas was left a significant inheritance from the large estate of his parents. Nicholas took seriously the words of Jesus: *“Sell what you own and give the money to feed the poor.”* And Nicholas did just that. He had a great love for those in society who were marginalized and rejected as well as the poor, many of whom were homeless and hungry.

Nicholas was particularly concerned about other orphans like himself who were without parents or family, and who were forced to enter state-run orphanages. On any given day, Nicholas could be seen making his way through the streets of Patara distributing *gold coins* from a large sack that he flung over his little shoulder.

Desiring to follow Jesus in all things, Nicholas began studies for the priesthood. Shortly after ordination, he was ordained a bishop. This was during the period in which the persecution of Christians was widespread. At the time, the ruling emperor was Diocletian who hated Christians and who demanded that Christians relinquish any and all ties to the Church and to Jesus Christ.



Emperor Diocletian

Diocletian feared that Nicholas would insight the masses to rise up against him because as a bishop, Nicholas had great influence over the spiritual lives of his flock. Diocletian also feared Nicholas himself, because he was a holy and pious man; thus, he believed that the future saint enjoyed special favor with God. Perhaps, the emperor also feared possible wrath coming from God if he killed Nicholas. Therefore, Diocletian spared Nicholas’ life and instead of beheading him, Diocletian had Nicholas thrown into prison and eventually exiled.

Nicholas spent many years imprisoned, however, although he was prevented from pursuing a priestly ministry dedicated to the poor as he desired, God used him in a different way to accomplish the same end. Nicholas continued to cultivate faith in God by spreading the Gospel from his prison cell. His efforts resulted in the conversions of

many who had lapsed in their faith.

Throughout his years as a prisoner, Nicholas lost neither his faith nor his love for Jesus. The iron bars, which separated him from his flock did not hamper his resilient human spirit and his desire to serve God. Nicholas was eventually released from prison in the year 343. On December 6, shortly after his release at age 73, Nicholas died.

Miracles & Saint Nicholas

Nicholas was known for his tremendous piety and faith as well as his profound ability to preach the *Word* of God that was relevant and meaningful for those who heard him. During his years of confinement, Nicholas was responsible for numerous miracles, particularly among many of the pagan leaders to whom Nicholas appeared through dreams. Many of these men, like Diocletian, himself, had been responsible for massive Christian persecutions.

Stories have been handed down from generation to generation about Nicholas that describe Nicholas' appearance to sailors warning them of storms or attacks from foreign shores. Consequently, he is recognized as the *patron saint* of sailors. Other stories tell of a generous and charitable Nicholas whose presence either through dreams or through physical manifestations changed for the better, the course of people's lives. This was especially true with regard to children, especially orphans. For this reason, Nicholas is known as the *patron saint of children*.



Nicholas is also credited with having performed numerous thoughtful deeds, most of which were done in secret, as he expected nothing in return for his compassionate gestures. Within a century after his death, Nicholas was elevated by the Church to sainthood. Today, he is venerated in the East as *Wonder Worker* or *Miracle Worker*. In the West, Saint Nicholas is known as the *patron saint* for many different occupations. In addition to being the *patron saint* of sailors and children, he is also the *patron saint* of bankers, students, scholars, laborers, travelers, judges, unmarried women, victims of injustice and prisoners. Saint Nicholas is also the *patron saint*, friend and protector of all in trouble or in need. Saint Nicholas is the *patron saint* of Russia, along with St. Andrew the Apostle.

Gift-Giving

Gift-giving has always been associated with Saint Nicholas, perhaps, because of his generous spirit as a child. The idea of exchanging gifts at Christmas first occurred in Germany and Switzerland. At the present time many, if not most of the European countries exchange gifts on December 6, leaving December 25, as a time for a spiritual celebration with church services and the gathering of family and



friends around a dining room table.

This *Joyful Season* becomes a wonderful opportunity to focus on the life of Saint Nicholas and his ministry to all of God's children. In addition, Saint Nicholas shows us the way to Jesus through children, the poor, the oppressed, the broken, the abused and those who are forgotten. The act of gift-giving involves not only the giving of ourselves to another; it also involves the giving of Jesus to the other because the act of giving, itself, resembles the compassion and love of Christ that he demonstrated through his healing ministry.



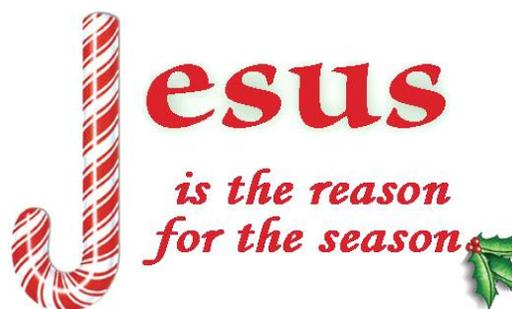
Saint Nicholas teaches us that as Christian men and women who endeavor to follow Jesus, we are called to *live-out* the *Good News* on a daily basis regardless of the obstacles that the world places before us. Even from his prison cell, Nicholas continued to be an *instrument* of God's healing *love*. Advent, Christmas and the ministry of Saint Nicholas serve as reminders that despite our limitations or *perceived* obstacles, we too, have the responsibility for bringing Jesus to others. What better time to begin than during the Advent and Christmas season?

- Saint Nicholas teaches us to look for the face of Jesus in

children and those who are less fortunate and to recognize his presence in people of all nationalities, races, creeds and color.

- Saint Nicholas teaches us to withhold judgment and criticism of others and to look at our brothers and sisters with compassion and love.
- Saint Nicholas teaches us to find Jesus in those who are wrongly treated, marginalized, abused and rejected.
- Saint Nicholas shows us how to find Jesus even in our enemies.

CANDY CANE



The origin of the candy cane dates back to Germany to the year 1670. A choirmaster at the Cathedral in Cologne, year after year on Christmas Eve would become annoyed at the noisy behavior on the part of the children during his annual production of the *Living Crèche*. Consequently, the wise choirmaster approached the local candy maker and requested that he make *sweet sticks* for the children to suck on throughout the long production.

The choirmaster decided to justify this rather radical idea in the chance that the cathedral rector should question the rationale of eating candy during a church service; thus,

he asked the candy maker to put a hook on one end of the candy stick as a reminder to the children of the shepherds who visited the Christ Child. The candy maker agreed, making the candy stick white as a way of teaching the youngsters about Jesus' sinless and pure nature. In addition, the candy maker added red stripes to symbolize the blood of Jesus that he shed on the cross.



The candy cane spread quickly throughout Europe and became associated with the *Christmas Season*. Candy Canes continued to be distributed throughout time to the young and the *young-at-heart* at Christmas Eve services throughout Europe.

POINSETTIA PLANT



The poinsettia plant is one of the most outstanding reminders of the *Christmas Season*. The poinsettia plant, which is also referred to as the *Star of Bethlehem* has its

origin in Mexico. The poinsettia was named after the first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. It was he who brought the poinsettia plant to America in 1928. In the eighteenth century, the Mexican people believed that the poinsettia plant was symbolic for the Star of Bethlehem. Since that time, the poinsettia has been associated with the *Christmas Season*. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow. Surrounding the flower are large red, white or pink leaves that are often mistaken for the flower.

According to tradition, the poinsettia was originally a green weed that grew in abundance in Mexico. There is a story about a poor Mexican girl named Pepita who had no gift to present to the Christ Child at the village's annual Christmas Eve service. As the young child made her way to the little chapel, she paused fixing her eyes on the elegant gifts that the other children were bringing in procession to the crib of the Christ Child. Pepita began to cry, fearing that she would disappoint the Baby Jesus as she had nothing to present to him. She also feared that the other children would pause long enough on their way to the crib to laugh at Pepita.

A priest happened to see the little girl as she wept by the roadside. Inquiring as to why she was so sad at such a joyous time of year, Pepita proceeded to explain to the old priest her dilemma. The priest told the little girl that the humblest of gifts, if given to Jesus with love would please him very much. As he was talking, the priest bent down and collected several common weeds that were plentiful by the roadside and gathered them in a bouquet. He then tied them with a string and gave them to little Pepita. As Pepita knelt before the Infant's Crib, the green top leaves turned into brilliant red petals, which filled

the manger with star-like flowers.

In addition to being a wonderful story about the origin of the beautiful poinsettia, it is also a story about our own relationship to Christ as well as our relationship to one another. We hear so often, and most will agree that this festive *Season of Advent*, which leads up to Christmas has become disguised and even buried in commercialism. This season is about God becoming a man and bringing the message of peace, love and good will to all. The best gift each of us can give to one another is the gift of self in an authentic spirit of love...with joy!



CHRISTMAS TREE



The Christmas tree is another *sign of the season*. Germany is traditionally credited with the beginning of the Christmas tree

tradition. In the sixteenth century, devout Christians are said to have brought evergreens into their homes and decorated them with special trinkets, goodies and candles. Some built Christmas pyramids out of wood and decorated them with evergreens.

The Christmas tree custom, also became popular in other parts of Europe. In 1841, Prince Albert of England, the husband of Queen Victoria started the tradition when he decorated the first English tree at Windsor Castle with a variety of sweets, fruits and gingerbread. Soon after, many other wealthy English families followed suit, using a variety of lavish items as ornaments. Charles Dickens describes such a tree as being covered with dolls, miniature furniture, tiny musical instruments, costume jewelry, fruit, candy and of course flickering candles. Whether simple or ornate, the ornaments used to decorate the Christmas tree were meant to symbolize the *fruits of redemption*.

It wasn't until the end of the nineteenth century that the Christmas tree tradition began to catch on in America. It was about that time when Christmas ornaments began arriving from Germany. It is interesting that Europeans used small trees between three and four feet, while Americans preferred trees that reached from floor to ceiling. It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that Americans began decorating their trees with homemade ornaments along with popcorn that was dyed in a variety of bright colors and interlaced with berries and nuts. With the invention of electricity, candles were no longer needed; thus, the trees were able to glow and flicker for days on end and even began to appear in town squares.

Important buildings, private and

public alike, signaled the beginning of the Christmas holiday with tree-lighting ceremonies. Lights that are strung on an evergreen tree have always symbolized Christ's birth. Saint John tells us in the prologue of his Gospel that Jesus came into the world as "*Light dispelling the darkness:*"

"In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him. What has come into being through him was life and this life was the life of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness cannot overpower it" (John 1:1-5).

Horns and bells were also used as part of the tree's decorations as a means of warding off evil spirits. Eventually, an angel acquired a place at the top of the tree as a way of recreating and remembering the angels that swarmed over the Child Jesus at the first Christmas.

CHRISTMAS CRECHE



St. Francis of Assisi is credited with having created the first Christmas crèche. It was the year 1223, three years before Francis' death and one year prior to his receiving the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ. This is also the year that Francis received approval from Rome. Pope Innocent III gave

permission for the establishment of the Franciscan Order, the Order of Friars Minor (OFM).

Francis had recently returned to Assisi from Rome with the good news from the pope; thus, the young friar wanted to celebrate his joy and to thank God in a very special way. Because it was near to the Feast of Christmas, Francis desired to recreate the birth at Bethlehem as a way of inspiring the village people to receive the Christ Child with both joy and awe. Francis wanted to demonstrate God's love with the sending of His Son into the world who was born *not* in luxury but in poverty, and in stark simplicity.



Locating a small cave in his little town of Greccio, Francis enlisted the help of friends and townspeople in preparing the little cave with straw and live animals, an ox and a donkey. The manger was a stone slab upon which Francis placed a little baby. The people in the town marched in procession with candles. The flame was meant to depict Jesus as the *Light of the world; Light* shining through darkness. Midnight Mass was celebrated and Francis who was a deacon preached about God's love in sending His Son to be born in simplicity and poverty, destined to suffer greatly out of love for humankind.

Greccio is a little hill town in Italy in

the providence of Lazio, which is located north of Florence. There is a small shrine in the town that contains what is believed to be the actual slab of stone used for the First Christmas Crèche in 1223.



CHRISTMAS ROSE



The Christmas Rose is native to Europe and is said to bloom throughout the winter months in the cooler climates of Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and the Scandinavian countries. Unlike the roses that we see in our New England climate, which lose their petals as part of the life cycle, the Christmas Rose, a bushy shrub consists of five white or whitish/pinkish petals that remain intact throughout the duration of the plant's life cycle.

Tradition places this legend in the fifteenth century in Scandinavia. Like the legend of the poinsettia, this story, also

involves a young girl whose name was Madelon who like Pepita desired to be part of the Christmas procession to the Infant Jesus' crib with the other children in her village. Madelon was saddened by the fact that while her peers brought exotic and extravagant gifts, she had nothing of value to present to the Christ Child.

Although driven to find a flower to present to the Baby Jesus, Madelon found nothing, due to the fact that it was a cold and snowy winter and nothing was in bloom. Crying by the roadside and feeling quite ashamed, an angel appeared to Madelon. Moved by the young girl's innocent and pure love for Jesus, the angel began to beat the ground at the spot where the tears of the young Madelon fell. From the ground burst forth a magnificent bush of white roses.

The angel told Madelon that nothing that anyone could bring to the Christ Child was more fitting than the Christmas Rose.

CHARLIE BROWN



This time of the year would not be complete without Charlie Brown and *The Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. It is a heartwarming story about the *search* for the *true meaning* of Christmas. However, the only person who is actually searching for the real meaning behind the holiday season is

Charlie Brown. His friends seem to be going through the motions of decorating, shopping and celebrating. All of Charlie's friends *appear* to lack a purpose and a reason for what they are doing.

As Charlie Brown observes his friends decorating and merry-making, he takes note of the fact that they *appear* to be overly consumed with the *secular* demands of the *Christmas Season*. In other words, although they decorate their houses and trees with lights, tinsel and glitter, they *appear* to lack an understanding as to how these decorations contribute to the meaning of the *Christmas Season*. Charlie reacts to their lack of *apparent* focus on Jesus who is the *reason for the season*.

Charlie Brown cannot quite put his finger on it. However, he *does* know that something is missing from his friends' preparation for Christmas. There is something about the Christmas preparations that fail to provoke meaning in the hearts of the participants. Whatever it is, Charlie Brown knows that it *has to be* something that is *extremely necessary* and something that definitely speaks to the *real meaning of what Christmas* is all about.

Who Do You Identify With?

Who is it that you most identify with? Is it Charlie Brown who wants to *feel* the real meaning behind the tinsel and glitter of the season? Or do you identify with Lucy and the others who just go through the motions simply because it seems like the right thing to do this time of year?

Some people are like children. They love everything about Christmas. They love the food, the decorating and the shopping. However, they are so invested in these things

that they forget the *real meaning* of the Christmas celebration. They forget the *reason for the season*.

There is always Linus! He is the one who never forgets that the *true meaning* of Christmas is about Jesus. Do you remember the exchange between Lucy and Charlie as they prepare for their Christmas pageant? Lucy as always takes charge. As she distributes the script to the cast, she assigns the part of the shepherd to Schermie who becomes visibly upset. "*Shepherd?*" he asks, "*I always have to be a shepherd!*"

The truth? Nobody wants to be a shepherd. Shepherds seem so unimportant. Yet, if we *listen* to the Gospel of Saint Luke *with our eyes*, we should all want to be shepherds. The shepherds are in fact, the superstars in Luke's account. The Gospel of Saint Luke is so beautiful in its simplicity. It is about Mary, Joseph and Jesus, along with the angels and shepherds. Luke makes no mention of Magi because his focus is *Jesus*. Jesus humbled himself to become one of us. In addition, Luke tells us much more. He is telling us *why* Jesus was born into the world and *for whom* he was born. Jesus came into the world for the shepherds and for the salvation of humankind.

The shepherds are real people living in the midst of their own world, sleeping with and protecting their flock. Sheep were very important to the economy of everyday life in Israel two thousand years ago. Yet, the shepherds were not considered to be very important, nor did they enjoy any prestige among their peers.

Luke portrays the true meaning of Christmas when he describes the shepherds who were the *first* to receive the announcement regarding the birth of the Son

of God, the long awaited-for Messiah. The shepherds were also the first to offer praise and adoration. Although they were the first, the shepherds were terrified and perhaps, even confused upon seeing the *Glory of God* in their midst.

This is the real meaning of Christmas: *The Incarnate God who has broken through human history.* God has come not to the rich and the powerful but to the lowly, those of us who *recognize* the need for His Son. The message that was proclaimed by the shepherds is clear: “*We do not have to fear God, for today we have been given Joy;*” joy that both Isaiah and Paul speak about in the readings for the third week of Advent, which is referred to as *Gaudete Sunday*.

An anemic, lackluster little Christmas tree was made beautiful by Charlie Brown’s friends; thus, as a result of the transformation, Charlie Brown discovers the real meaning of Christmas: *Light! A Light* that expels darkness in the birth of God’s Son.

The *Christmas Season* is a reminder to those of *us who believe* that in spite of a world gone mad on so many different levels, there is reason for joy; reason for hope; reason for faith. Luke reminds us of the great joy that was present among the shepherds, the lowliest of all who tell us not to fear because joy is ours.

good
TIDINGS
of great
JOY

The *Advent Season* ushers in the *Christmas Season*. It is about *reading the signs of the times!* We are called to bask in

the joy of the season as all the signs that usher in the birth of Christ prepare us for this great event: “*Light shining through darkness!*” In the readings for the *First Sunday of Advent*, St. Paul instructs the followers of Jesus to “*Throw off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light*” (Romans 13:11-14). Let this holiday season mark a new beginning for *your* life. Walk in the *Light* of Christ and transmit his *Light* throughout the NEW YEAR!

ABC'S OF CHRISTMAS



A...is for Animals who share the stable.
B... for the Babe with their manger for His cradle.
C... for the Carols so blithe and so gay.
D... for December, the twenty-fifth day.
E... for the Eve when we are all so excited.
F... for the Fun when the tree is at last lighted.
G... for the Gifts Santa leaves on that special day.
H... for the Holly with pointed leaves on that special day.
I... for Ivy that clings on the wall.
J...is for Jesus, the reason for it all.
K... for the Kindness begot by this feast.
L... for the Lights of the season.

M... for the Manger bed for Jesus at his birth.
N... for the Nowells we sing Christmas night.
O... for the Oxen, the first to adore Him.
P... for the Presents the Wise Men laid before Him.
Q...is for Quiet night, with hardly a sound.
R... for the Reindeer leaping the roofs.
S...is for the Stockings that Santa Claus stuffs.
T... for the Toys, the Tinsel, the Tree.
U...is for Us...the family of God.
V...is for Visitors bringing us cheer.
W...is Welcome to the Happy New Year.
X...is for X-tra special feelings of Christmas surrounding us all.
Y...is for Your Christmas Joys- may they be bright.
Z...is for the animal Zoo at his crib that First Christmas (anonymous).

Let us all use the Joyful *Signs of the Season* as a means of drawing closer to the Christ who lives within each of us, not only at Advent and Christmas but throughout the year. Our “*secular*” society has made the *Christmas Story* come alive for us who believe! Say thank-you and enjoy the season!

JNM

