

A Christmas Essay

Christmas is when people celebrate the birth of Jesus. Jesus, whose name means “Savior,” was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph traveled there to be counted in a census, but many others returned there for that same reason, so there were no available rooms at the inn. Mary and Joseph were forced to sleep in the stables with the animals. Mary gave birth to Jesus that night. His first bed was a manger used to hold feed. As the son of God, Jesus’ birth signified hope for the future. Through him, forgiveness for sins and salvation could be obtained. His birth was also marked by the sighting of the northern star by three wise men, who set out to find him. A new star signified the birth of a king, and they wanted to worship him. The current king of the land feared the birth and tried to kill Jesus, but he did not succeed. Jesus survived and went on to inspire people to this very day, over 2,000 years later.

At first glance, it may seem that most Christmas traditions conflict with celebrating Jesus’ birth. Some even argue that December is not when he was really born, so we should not celebrate then. While the date of his birth may not be certain, and Christmas trees, Santa Clause and Christmas lights may seem at odds with the holiday, they actually all go together perfectly. There couldn’t be a better time of year to celebrate the miracle in the manger.

There are certain days of power, special days throughout the year, that resonate with people of all different cultures, religions and backgrounds. Christmas is one of those times. Also during that time of year, people celebrate Winter Solstice and Hanukkah. Even Santa Clause has his place in the celebrations. The season is about hope, rebirth and miracles.

Hanukkah, called the “festival of lights” is based around the eight day remembrance of the miracle that occurred when one day’s oil lasted for eight days, just enough time for them to make more oil. The Jewish people illuminate their homes to remind those outside of the miracle they celebrate. They light candles on the Menorah to mark the passage of the eight days.

Lights are also common in other traditions. Winter Solstice, on the longest, darkest night of the year, (usually around Dec. 21st), celebrates the rebirth of God. Yule logs are lit to remind people of the return of the sun in the spring and summer. It represents the hope that winter will end. Candles are hung on trees to represent the light of the sun that will return after the winter. It is the rebirth of the sun to the Earth. From that point on, the sun will again grow strong, and the days will grow longer. Even the Romans hung candles on their trees to celebrate Saturnalia, birthday of the unconquered sun, a holiday that began in Mid-December and lasted until January.

In the birth of Jesus, the northern star is a physical light in the dark, showing the way, guiding the three wise men. Jesus is a symbolic light, a beacon of hope in dark times. Thus, Christmas lights are a symbol of hope, a light in the dark, and a reminder the night or winter will not last forever. Better things are ahead.

The Christmas tree is another symbol of life and hope. An evergreen, it is a tree that survives through the cold, dark winter. It is a reminder life will return in spring. Wiccans decorate trees with berries and rosebuds at Winter Solstice. The ancient Scandinavians celebrated Winter Solstice by hanging apples from their trees. Both practices represent the return of life. Chinese Christians decorate with paper lanterns, flowers and chains. Paper flowers are also a symbol of spring, when the flowers will return.

Some question the giving of gifts at Christmas, but that tradition is also very old. The Romans exchanged gifts during Saturnalia to promote good luck. Some people exchange gifts on January 6th on Three Kings Day, the day observed for when the three wise men arrived and gave gifts to

Jesus. Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Smyrna was known for his generosity and willingness to give to those in need. Bishop Nicholas was known to throw presents through the windows of the homes of poor children to raise their spirits. It gave them hope during their dark times. He is remembered on December 6th, and many around the world exchange gifts then to commemorate his kindness.

From the kindness of Bishop Nicholas sprung the magic and good will of Santa Clause, the jolly old fat man in the red coat, who visits children on Christmas Eve to deliver presents. A symbol of hope and kindness, Santa Clause encourages us all to believe in magic and miracles, to trust and give of ourselves in the same generous manner. The spirit of Santa Clause exists in the hearts of all mankind.

Even candy canes and the twelve days of Christmas are not without a deeper meaning. Candy canes were designed to represent the purity and suffering of Jesus, and his role as a shepherd. The twelve days of Christmas, from the day after Christmas until the beginning of Epiphany on January 6th, is the time celebrated as when the wise men journeyed and gave gifts to Jesus after his birth. On the twelfth night, some celebrate by exchanging gifts or eating King's cake (also enjoyed at Mardi Gras in the United States). Some people believe that even the song for the twelve days of Christmas had secular origins as a song to teach catechism to children.

Christmas is a time of hope, giving and rebirth. We put up lights on our homes and trees and burn the Yule log, to shine as lights in the darkest night, to remind ourselves the darkness will not last forever. That is also why we decorate the Christmas tree, and evergreen, a symbol of life, even in the bleakest time of year. Wiccans celebrate the rebirth of their God and the return of the sun. Jews worship God and celebrate "the miracle of the container of oil." Christians worship God and celebrate the birth of Jesus to remember the hope he gives us for our eternal souls. His birth, a miraculous event, in the darkest of circumstances, gives us hope and encouragement for our lives.

We give gifts and wait for Santa to promote good will and luck, to give hope to those in need, show love to our family and friends. An unopened gift, wrapped in shiny paper, is full of endless possibilities, just as our new year will be full of possibilities. Each day, each season, each year is a gift full of hope.

Too many people, from too many cultures across thousands of years have found meaning and reasons to celebrate at this time of year to ignore its significance. It is a time of power, a time when all people of the world can come together to hope, feast and be a beacon of light in the darkness. Santa Clause, gift giving and decorating our homes and trees do not have to battle with religious observances of Christ's birth or Hanukkah. Instead, they can all reinforce one another under their common meanings.