

Dear Friends in Christ:

Every year at this time, I write a newsletter article on the importance of the season of Advent--a season properly focused on the return of Christ to judge the quick and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end. This year I want to focus on the Festival of the Incarnation—otherwise known as Christmas. This is the course of least resistance since Christmas invariably takes over by the middle of December and sucks all the Oxygen out of the Advent season.

The celebration of Christmas is rather late to the party, but it seems to be firmly in place by the 4th Century. When was Christmas first celebrated? In an old list of Roman bishops, compiled in A. D. 354 these words appear for A.D. 336: "*25 Dec.: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae.*" December 25th, Christ born in Bethlehem, Judea. This day, December 25, 336, is the first recorded celebration of Christmas. Of course, the Church before that celebrated the birth of Jesus, but it was wrapped into the celebration of Epiphany. Here is the description in the Catholic News Agency:

In the early Church, Christians, particularly those in the East, celebrated the advent of Christ on Jan. 6 by commemorating Nativity, Visitation of the Magi, Baptism of Christ, and the Wedding of Cana all in one feast of the Epiphany. By the fourth century, both Christmas and Epiphany had been set as separate feasts in some dioceses. At the Council of Tours in 567, the Church set both Christmas Day and Epiphany as feast days on Dec. 25 and Jan. 6, respectively, and named the 12 days between the feasts as the Christmas Season.

God reveals himself to human beings as the baby Jesus. This is the content of Christmas. This is the content of Epiphany. This is the content of The Holidays, although secularists tend to use that term in order not to miss out on the revelry while denying the Reason for the season.

Still, there are differences. We have Christmas carols that we do not sing on Epiphany. We have Epiphany hymns (some of the most beautiful of the church year) that we do not sing on Christmas. Our readings on Christmas Eve focus on Luke's account of the birth of Jesus with angels and shepherds and the stable and manger. We sing *Away in a Manger* and *Silent Night*.

On Epiphany we sing *How Brightly Shines the Morning Star* and *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. We focus on the Matthew Account of the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus and his family with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This of course symbolizes the coming of the nations to the Christ of Israel—fulfilling a number of Old Testament prophecies.

Back to Christmas, we tend to use a lot of green /evergreen to decorate--connecting the symbol of life with the birth of Christ. The use of lights is more of an Epiphany theme as the true light which enlightens every human being is come into the world (John 1), but a lot of people take their lights down on December 26th. Don't ask me why.

Lying secularists and some sectarians have for centuries accused Christians of having invented Christmas out of whole cloth to imitate and compete with the Roman holiday of Saturnalia. Saturnalia was an agricultural festival which ended in human sacrifice and gift-giving. Practitioners of Roman Religion pushed Saturnalia hard in the 4th Century because of the runaway popularity of Christmas among the masses. The Romans wanted to compete, but it did not work. Even the gift giving that happens at Christmas was probably not borrowed from Saturnalia. As far as I know, no Christians celebrate Christmas by burning wax figurines or with human sacrifice in the form of killing a gladiator or two. We, in fact, tell ourselves that we give gifts at Christmas in thankful remembrance of God's gift of Jesus to us on Christmas.

At St James Lutheran Church we will have three celebrations around Christmas. The first is the Christmas Carol Festival and Pageant put on by the Sunday School kids on Sunday, December 14 at 4pm. The second is our Christmas Eve Service at 5pm on the 24th. The third is the Christmas Day Service at 10am on Dec. 25. There is some talk of going Christmas Caroling during the run-up to Christmas—stay tuned. I invite you to come out for all these events and celebrate the fact that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth—and we have beheld His glory* (John 1:14).