

STORIES
Behind the
GREAT
TRADITIONS
of
CHRISTMAS



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STORIES
Behind the
GREAT
TRADITIONS
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CHRISTMAS



ACE COLLINS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLINT HANSEN

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Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas

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who, for the past four decades,
have made every day seem like Christmas
for tens of thousands of third-world orphans.
My humble thanks to you
for this great Christian tradition of selfless service.*



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INTRODUCTION

Before You Wish for an “Old-Fashioned” Christmas. . . .

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” or so the famous Christmas song goes. But for many Americans, a modern Christmas does not seem to hold the spirit, the charm, and the warmth of an old-fashioned holiday. Yet before we bemoan the demise of what we think Christmas was like in the “old days,” a time when it wasn’t the most commercialized holiday in America, we might want to reexamine what Christmas past really was. There is no doubt that today this holy time of year is our most frenetic, stressful season. It is therefore only natural that Christians lament that the real reason for the season seems to have been largely forgotten in the midst of cookie baking, decorating, and office parties. It seems that the most awesome event in human history, the coming of God to earth as a babe in a manger, has been forever obscured by Santa, shopping, and merrymaking. So is it really “the most wonderful time of the year”?

Before we brood and protest too much over the ruin of what we think Christmas must have been like in generations

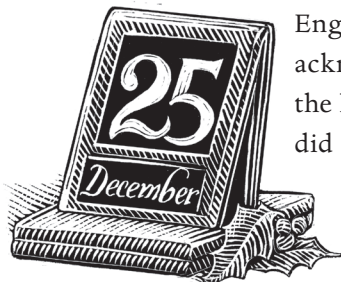
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long past, we might actually feel encouraged about the season we celebrate today when we consider what Christmas was really like in the days of old.

Only in relatively recent times, the past two hundred years, has Christmas even been celebrated by most Christians. Up until the 1800s, the day recognized as Christ's birthday was largely a pagan celebration. Those who bemoan the lack of religious zeal in modern Christmases would have been appalled at the way people in early America celebrated the day. For a majority of people who embraced Christmas throughout history, Christ wasn't a part of the day at all. In most of the world, especially in England and America, Christmas was not a time of worship, prayer, and reflection; rather, it was a day set aside to sing bawdy songs, drink rum, and riot in the streets.

For centuries, Christmas was anything but a holy day. It was most often a sinful parade of excess, a day set aside for ignoring laws and even terrorizing citizens. Mummers, the British carolers of the day, were musicians and actors who roamed the streets, presenting plays and singing songs.

Mirroring the boisterous nature of the English Christmas, these songs rarely acknowledged the Christian aspects of the holiday. Those who attended church did so in wild costumes, the messages of many priests were anything but scriptural, and gambling was common during the services. After



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church the poor often stormed the homes of the elite in mob-like fashion, pounding on doors and windows, demanding the finest food and drink. If the hosts did not respond, the guests broke into the homes and took what they wanted. This combination “holiday” of Mardi Gras and Halloween was nothing like today’s Christmas. The drunken celebrations hearkened back to the time when Romans and Greeks marked the winter solstice with a weeklong festival of self-indulgence. As nothing about these celebrations was staid or reverent, many devoted Christians loathed the holiday and considered it an instrument of sin and evil.

How did the Christmas that Christians recognize today as Christ’s birthday deteriorate into such an orgy of irreverent excess? For one thing, history tells us that it took over three hundred years for the church to decide on a day on which to honor Christ’s birth. In the minds of millions who go to church now, December 25th is the actual day when Mary gave birth to Jesus. It is ironic that an “undeniable” fact many Christians think they know about their faith has no factual basis at all.

The one biblical passage that alludes to the specific time of the incarnation all but rules out winter as being the season of Jesus’ birth. Logic clearly dictates that shepherds would not have been out with their flocks during the coldest time of the year. Most modern Bible scholars believe that Christ was probably born in the spring, based on what we now know of Roman census practices. Though they concede that Jesus could have been born in the summer or fall, one fact seems clear: the

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date of the Savior's birth was nowhere near December 25th. So why do we celebrate Christmas at a time when the birth of Christ could not have taken place? Probably because early church leaders wanted a holy day to counteract the ancient wild festivals held annually around the time of the winter solstice.

Long before the birth of Christ, almost every culture set aside the shortest days of the year as a celebration of the "rebirth" of the sun. For peoples whose livelihood depended on sunlight, the time when the shortest day of the year passed and the days of light became longer was an event to be marked and treasured. It was wonderful to know that the dark days of winter were finally over and spring was just ahead.

As far back as history is recorded, midwinter festivals were held in Babylon and Egypt. The ancient Germans held fertility festivals in midwinter as well. In Phrygia the birth of the sun god Attis was celebrated on December 25th, as was the birth of the sun god Mithras in Persia. The Greeks partied in late December because of the return of the sun, and during this time the Romans celebrated Saturnalia, a festival dedicated to Saturn, the god of peace and plenty. Saturnalia was the party to end all parties, running annually from the 17th to 24th of December. During this festival, public gathering places were decorated with flowers and banners; gifts and candles were exchanged; and the whole population, slaves and masters alike, celebrated with wild abandon.

To avoid religious persecution during this Roman pagan

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festival, early Christians decked their homes with Saturnalia holly. Yet for many who had only recently come to know Christ as Lord and Savior, the lure of the party was simply too great. While not actually worshipping Saturn, a majority of Roman Christians still participated in every facet of the weeklong revelry. Church leaders were often horrified as their members fell prey to their old habits and customs. To the leaders it seemed like sin was the central theme of the festival. They knew something had to be done, but what? For years the question remained unanswered.

As the number of Christians increased and the followers of Jesus developed new customs, it would have been natural for them to mark the birth of Christ. Yet ironically, this time of great joy was overlooked. In fact, the early church did not celebrate the birth of Christ at all until 125, when Telesphorus, the second bishop of Rome, declared that church services should be held to memorialize “the Nativity of our Lord and Savior.” Still, no day was set aside as the official birth date of Christ. Since no one was quite sure in which month Christ had been born, the first Christmas services were usually held in September, during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets (modern-day Rosh Hashanah). Within a few years, more than a dozen different days had been assigned by various congregations as the birth date of Christ. Eventually, the most common date for celebrating Christ’s birth was January 6th, the modern-day religious holiday of Epiphany. The fact that church leaders did not choose to designate a single date

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for Christmas indicated how little emphasis was placed on this celebration.

By the fourth century, the Roman Empire finally began to convert to Christianity. When this happened, Easter became one of the most celebrated holidays in the realm. Yet as many in the empire came to worship Jesus, the old traditions and holidays continued. So while the persecution may have stopped and Christian faith might have replaced the old pagan ways in much of the empire, the party of Saturnalia, as well as a host of other winter solstice celebrations, flourished. In 274, when the solstice fell on the 25th of December, the Roman emperor Aurelian proclaimed the date as *Natalis Solis Invicti*, the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. This act was more than most Christian leaders of the time could stomach, yet they felt powerless to do anything about it. After all, while many in Rome were Christians, the emperor was not.

In 320 Pope Julius I had grown tired of seeing the birth of Christ celebrated on scores of different days by churches all across the empire. Though he had no particular reason for choosing it, the pope specified December 25th as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ. This proclamation was in large part ignored, as Christmas still took a back seat to *Natalis Solis Invicti*.

Five years later Constantine the Great, who had recently converted to the Christian faith, introduced Christmas as an immovable feast on December 25th. He also adopted Sunday as a holy day in a new seven-day week. These decisions were no

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doubt a result of church leaders' lobbying the Roman emperor for a Christian holiday that would cancel out the pagan mid-winter celebration. With the power of the government behind this date, they assumed that Saturn and all the partying that went with the marking of this pagan god's day could be forgotten forever.

Their assumption was quickly proven erroneous. Change did not come quickly. With the birth of Christ going head-to-head against the pagan celebrations, many chose to celebrate the pagan holiday and repent after the parties were finished. Some Christians who did choose to mark Christ's birth did so in the same fashion that pagans honored Saturn and other gods, with wild carousing and sinful behavior. Needless to say, the church was not pleased. Things became so bad that the way Christmas was celebrated even became one of the planks that helped overthrow the English monarchy in 1649.

Oliver Cromwell was a politician who came from an obscure background, rose up in the ranks of Parliament, and led a rebellion that overthrew King Charles I. As a member of the Puritan sect, the most conservative Protestant movement of the era, and as Britain's new "Lord Protector," Cromwell set about trying to restore order and create a democracy. During his fifteen years of rule, the British Empire would change dramatically in a host of different ways. Yet for the common people, the most profound proclamation that came from Cromwell's reign might have been his banning of all Christmas festivities. Much to the horror of the majority of the

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nation's citizens, Cromwell outlawed Christmas celebrations. Those who took to the streets for merrymaking, singing of carols, or participating in any of the old traditions of the day would be arrested, fined, jailed.

Cromwell, like many others who headed the Catholic and Protestant movements of the time, believed that Christmas should be a sober day of reflection. Unless it fell on a Sunday, it should be treated no differently than any other day of the week. People should go about their daily activities, do their work, and go home to quietly consider what Christ meant in their lives. No gifts should be given, no toasts made, and no carols sung. It was to be a solemn, colorless day.

For his entire rule, Cromwell managed to put a cap on the traditionally riotous English Christmas behavior. Yet after he died and was replaced by his son, the commoners demanded the restoration of the old-fashioned Christmas celebrations. When Richard Cromwell, Oliver's son and England's new leader, refused, the door was opened for a rebellion. With the promise of making Christmas what it had been, Charles II was welcomed back to the throne, and the Puritans were tossed out in the streets.

Charles, and those who followed him, restored the debauchery of Christmas past. Many in the royal family even encouraged the social chaos and misbehavior by contributing liquor and food for the celebrations. A popular song of the time was a tribute to the return of Charles and the restoration of the Christmases of old.

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*Now thanks to God for Charles' return,
Whose absence made old Christmas mourn,
For then we scarcely did it know,
Whether it Christmas were or no.*

With the holiday again a drunken street celebration, songs of the era, including “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” alluded to the nature of the carnival. Large bands of men would go to upper-class homes demanding food, drink, and money. If the homeowners did not comply, their houses were often looted. When the old carol mentions the singers want pudding, an underlying threat can be heard in the line, “We won’t leave until we get some.” Those who lived in the palatial homes the crowds visited knew the rioters would not depart until they had gotten what they wanted. So even though the royal class had returned to power, many of them feared Christmas as a day of unpredictable violence.

Church leaders of all denominations were aghast at the return of the pagan Christmas celebrations, but they were also powerless to do anything about it. In fact, except for the Church of England and the Catholic Church, churches simply closed their doors and ignored Christmas altogether. The police usually wrote off the often violent day as a tradition, so few lawbreakers were arrested. For generations, in many areas of London, Christmas was a day when women and children feared to venture into the streets.

Over the next two centuries the hope for a Christ-filled

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Christmas might have been lost altogether if it had not been for many Catholic and Anglican churches stubbornly holding Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services. Other than these gatherings of worship and the quiet reflections of some families that shared the story of the Savior's birth at home, Christmas was anything but holy in almost all of the English-speaking world.

After failing to stop the sinful nature of Christmas celebrations in England, the Puritans attempted to simply outlaw Christmas in the New World. Beginning with the landing of Englishmen at Plymouth Rock in 1620, the holiday was banned throughout New England. Churches did not meet on this day, and businesses were ordered to stay open. Anyone who was caught celebrating Christmas in any way was subject to arrest and fines. These laws remained in effect for more than 150 years, through the Revolutionary War. Christmas was so largely ignored in early America that beginning in 1789, and on each Christmas for the next sixty-seven years, Congress met on December 25th. During these meetings, no one stopped to acknowledge Jesus' birth.

In spite of the early success at outlawing Christmas in the New World, boatloads of immigrants soon overpowered the wishes of the Puritans. The anti-Christmas laws may have remained on the books, but they were soon ignored. In most American cities, the "Lords of Disorder" took over the streets on December 25th. The drunken parties and gang riots grew so bad that in 1828 the New York City Council met in

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special session to discuss the issue, and a special police force was formed just to deal with the unlawful conduct of citizens on Christmas Day. Yet even as New York put men in uniform out in the streets to protect life and property from the unruly Christmas revelers, the spirit of the season was about to change.

While in England and America Christmas had become little more than an excuse to party, in Germany the holiday had evolved into a time when family and friends gathered to share food and fellowship and to acknowledge and celebrate the birth of the Savior. In homes throughout Germany, Christmas was the second most holy day of the year, eclipsed only by Easter. This day was especially important to children. The music, the simple decorations, the homemade treats, and the evergreen trees that could be found in many homes made Christmas the most anticipated time of the year.

When Queen Victoria married her cousin, Germany's Prince Albert, in 1840, the English Christmas was transformed as well. Albert brought with him the reverent and family-oriented German traditions of the season, which turned Christmas celebrations in Windsor Castle into a family affair. Soon British families picked up on the way the royals were spending their Christmas and adopted the new traditions. For the first time, peace on earth seemed like it might have a chance on December 25th in the British Isles. Yet it took a combination of several elements to make Christmas a universally accepted time of joy and family gatherings.

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In America on Christmas Eve 1822, a minister and educator, Clement Clarke Moore, shared a poem he'd written with his children. "A Visit from St. Nicholas," now known as "The Night Before Christmas," would soon do more than entertain Moore's small New York family. Printed the next year in the *New York Sentinel*, the poem about the jolly old elf would dramatically change the way Americans looked at the season. For the first time, children were seen as an important part of Christmas. The door was now open for the holiday to be reshaped into one that children of all ages could view as their own.

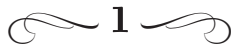
Then, in 1834, when Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* was published, another step was made in stressing the meaning and importance of Christmas. At the heart of Dickens's story were charity, hope, love, and family. This book was written at a time when the Industrial Age had created a culture in which money and hard labor seemed to rule every facet of society. Holidays had been all but eliminated. Men worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. Children were often put to work in factories at the age of eight or nine. No one had time to stop for even a moment to examine the wonder of life, much less reflect on the birth of a Savior. With Scrooge representing the common thinking of almost all industrialists of the time in both England and the United States, *A Christmas Carol* made people take a second look at their values.

Over the next twenty to thirty years, Christmas evolved from a holiday characterized by drinking and riots into a day of family, giving, and worship. Thanks to Moore's St. Nick,

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Santa Claus was everywhere—in stores, on street corners, and in advertising displays. Buying presents and decorating trees became important. In America, states began to declare Christmas an official holiday. Finally, after eighteen centuries of all but ignoring the day, churches began to open their doors for believers to worship, sing songs about Christ’s birth, and celebrate not just the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter, but his incarnation as well. Perhaps ironically, with the introduction of Santa and Scrooge, and with the commercialization of Christmas, those living in America and England finally got a chance to experience the real meaning of Christmas. Santa put an end to the drunken riots and brought peace to the season, and this allowed millions to reflect on the peace offered by the babe’s birth in a manger.

The “first Christmas” was a simple time of beauty and wonder. The birth of Christ was less about celebration than it was about family. Though many today may grow tired of the commercialization of Christmas, in reality it has opened the door for Christ to once again become the focal point of the season, and for family, especially children, to be at the heart of the celebration. So today, much more than in the past, we can truly sing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year!”



ADVENT

Advent is a word often heard during the weeks leading up to the Christmas season, but as many churches do not actually celebrate Advent, a great number of people do not understand its meaning or its place in church history. To millions, Advent is about wreaths, candles, and calendars. While these three elements are a way to mark the Advent season and have become an essential part of the celebration of this tradition, maybe even overshadowing the four weeks of Advent itself, there is a great deal more to Advent than this.

Advent is a Latin word meaning “the coming.” Officially established by church leaders in the sixth century, Advent was originally meant to be a time when Christians reflected on the meaning of Christmas and when new believers spiritually prepared themselves for baptism. Beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30th and running until Christmas Eve, Advent was essentially four weeks set aside to contemplate what the coming of Jesus meant not only to the world but to every individual’s soul. Hence, while recognized and

organized by the church, Advent was also supposed to be a time of personal retrospection and growth. Today, fourteen hundred years after the first Advent season, many families use the symbols of Advent—wreaths, candles, and calendars—to bring the spiritual meaning of Christmas alive in a way that teaches minds, touches hearts, and reflects the original purpose of the tradition.

To the early Christians, three different meanings were to be found in the days of Advent, or the days of the coming. The first was the coming of the Son of God to earth in human form as the babe in the manger. The second was the coming of Jesus into the lives, hearts, and actions of those who accepted him as their Savior. The third was the future coming when Jesus will return to the earth as a king. As times changed and the world came to view Christmas in terms of the baby Jesus and not the role he played on earth and the role he will play in his future kingdom, the meaning of Advent changed as well.

Until World War II, most people who celebrated Advent dwelled more on the final coming, the time when Jesus would return, than on the first coming, the birth of the child. But as Christmas evolved into a holiday for children, Advent also evolved into a time to remember the child in the manger. A part of the missionary zeal of the holiday may have been lost, but for most people who celebrate Advent, the tenderness and love that was presented in the story of the first Christmas has come to mean even more during the Advent season.

Even in the early church, the clergy and the laypeople

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looked for tangible ways to help believers remember the season of Advent. In far northern Europe, the Vikings who had converted to Christianity grasped upon the idea of Advent with an exuberance that did not exist in the rest of world. Because the Norse winters were so long and dark, the light that Jesus brought to the earth, along with the promise of everlasting life beyond the bounds of a harsh world, meant a great deal to these new believers. Out of this faith and their cultural interpretation of the Christmas season, the Vikings created the Advent wreath.

The evergreen tree was a wonderful inspiration to the people of northern Europe. Trapped by long harsh winters, going weeks suffering through black cold nights and short bitter days, these people looked upon the heartiness and strength of the fir trees with awe. During a time when almost everything else died, here was a plant that even winter could not stunt or stop. Because of this, the Christians of this region saw the tree as a symbol for faith. During the season of Advent, they took limbs from the evergreen and shaped them into a wheel-like decoration. Then, to mark the passing days and remember the strength of their faith, they placed a candle on the wreath to represent the light brought to the world with Christ's birth. These Advent wreaths were the first symbols used to mark the monthlong period anticipating Christmas.

Over time the custom of the Advent wreath spread across Europe. As it did, more candles were added, one for each week of the season. Though the candles varied in color from church

to church and from country to country, the meaning of each light remained the same. Three of the candles, most commonly purple, represented what many Christians believed to be the most precious gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, and love. The final candle, most often red in color, symbolized the joy of new life gained through the gift of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Some added a white candle to the wreath. It was lit on Christmas Eve and stood for Jesus' birth.

For centuries, the wreath was the sole symbol of Advent, but during the late Middle Ages, stand-alone candles joined the wreath in marking the importance of the four weeks of worship and reflection. Initially one large candle was used. Marks were made on the candle to represent each day between the first Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve. In churches and homes, the candles were lit daily and allowed to burn until they reached the next mark. Over the course of a month, the candle would be used up.

Other traditions included using many different candles, one lit during each day of Advent. Some families incorporated prayers into each lighting ritual. On the final day, when all the candles were lit, the wick of a large candle was ignited. Slowly, each of the smaller candles would be extinguished until only the one standing for Christ remained to light the room.

The Advent candles took on special meanings in many churches. One candle was lit during each Sunday of the celebration. Usually the first candle represented the prophets who predicted the coming of Jesus. The second candle represented

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the Bible and its message. The third candle came to stand for Jesus' mother Mary and her acceptance of her mission. On the final Sunday of Advent, a candle was lit for John the Baptist, the man who told the world that a Savior would be coming soon. Most churches that participated in this practice had a larger candle that stood in the middle of the other four. This candle was lit on Christmas Day and stood for Jesus.

The Advent tradition that is most common today is also the newest—the advent calendar. The Advent calendar originated in Germany a century and a half ago. This children's favorite has probably done more to keep alive the ancient tradition of marking the weeks leading up to Christmas than any other custom or tradition.

Since Germans celebrated Christmas as a children's holiday well before the rest of the world caught onto the concept, it is not surprising that these people adapted the marking of the days of Advent into a ritual that children would find fascinating. Two centuries ago, in many German homes an Advent wreath was hung, but instead of candles, twenty-four tiny bags were placed in the wreath. Beginning on December 1, each day the children opened a new bag, inside of which was a special treat. For eager children, it was like getting a gift every day.



The Advent calendar was an outgrowth of these treat-wreaths and the old custom of using a chalk line to mark off the

days from December 1 until Christmas. As a majority of people could not read during the 1800s, and even fewer had access to a calendar, many families would make a mark on their door on the first day of December. Then they would continue to add marks until the marks totaled twenty-five. This is how they knew when to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Gerhard Lang's mother took the concept of marking the days a step further. Using a large prenumbered board, she hung twenty-four pieces of candy with string, one by the number for each day of the month. Gerhard was allowed to take down one treat per day during the first twenty-four days of December. When the candy was gone, Christmas had arrived.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Lang had grown into a man and was a partner in the printing firm Reichhold and Lang. Remembering how his mother had counted down the days until Christmas, he printed and sold twenty-four tiny pictures that could be glued to any large calendar. The concept quickly became popular, and by 1908 Lang was producing calendars that had doors or windows that could be opened. Inside each door was the drawing of a piece of candy, a toy, or a Christmas decoration. Overnight, the "Munich Christmas Calendar" became one of the most popular Christmas traditions in Germany. By the end of World War II, the custom had spread across Europe and to the United States. By this time the calendars' windows not only hid children's presents but some also opened to Bible verses and pictures from the nativity scene. Such calendars were for sale in stores and catalogs in almost every corner of the world.

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Today Advent calendars are one of the most common ways to count down the days before Christmas. Colorful and inexpensive, some secular, others filled with spiritual images, the imagery presented on each new calendar helps stir excitement about the coming of Christmas. And even though few who use the calendars realize it, that anticipation of “the coming” is what Advent is really all about.

In worship services, wreaths, candles, or calendars, Advent is much like a movie preview. Each of its forms and symbols marks the time leading to the special event that is about to take place. Advent heightens the senses and emotions and sets the stage for the wonder of Christmas. When presented in the proper way, the way in which the early church intended, Advent also plants the spiritual seeds that grow into an understanding of the reason for this special season. Christmas is still Christmas without Advent, but the festive four-week count-down puts the holiday into the proper perspective.

2

ANGELS

Even in forums that ignore Jesus' tie to the Christmas holiday, angels often find a prominent place. For reasons few can explain, throughout history these heavenly creatures have touched hearts and changed minds, they have caused people to reflect and reconsider, and they have represented the force of good in such profound ways that even evil seems to bow down before them. And while it is written that they are with us always, perhaps it is during Christmas that they seem most real to us.

During the holiday season, angels seem to be in as many places as Santa. Angels fly through the season as often as snowflakes, and their wings and halos are front and center in almost every aspect of the numerous Christmas festivals and celebrations. They can be found in music, in television shows, and in all kinds of advertisements. Angels are the stars of movies, the subjects of books, and the fund-raising symbols of numerous organizations. Angels are one of the most popular ornaments and decorations and one of the most familiar designs on

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wrapping paper. They are used as outdoor decorations, perch atop Christmas trees, and shimmer on festive sweaters.

The dictionary defines an angel as “a divine winged messenger.” While accurate, this definition fails to touch on the warm and personal relationship that angels have traditionally had with humankind. Throughout history, angels have been protectors as well as messengers, and while commanding reverence and awe, they have also projected compassion and understanding. Perhaps that is why we call a person who does something wonderful an angel.

Angels are mentioned throughout the Bible. Yet when most people contemplate angels, they think primarily of the Christmas story. There can be little doubt that the many appearances of these heavenly creatures in the early pages of the New Testament served to reinforce the importance of the birth of Christ and the impact his life would have on the world. Yet these appearances also gave angels personalities and human qualities that allowed people to strongly identify with them. While angels have always been mysterious and sometimes frightening, as bearers of good news they have been welcomed.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that an angel named Gabriel visited Mary and assured her that she was part of God’s greatest plan for humankind. An angel visited Joseph as well. Angels also announced “good tidings of great joy” to shepherds in nearby fields the day Christ was born. And in each of these cases, the biblical writers give us the sense that angels were not

just announcing incredible news; they were carefully watching over and protecting each participant in this great drama.

The importance of angels can best be seen by the space they were given in the Gospels. Not one of the biblical scribes described the shepherds or the wise men or went into detail concerning their conversations with Mary and Joseph. None of the writers painted a descriptive picture of the manger or even bothered to identify the time of year when Jesus was born. But in both accounts of the birth of Jesus found in the New Testament, several verses are devoted to what the angels said and how they appeared. In the accounts found in Matthew and Luke, it is obvious that even the earliest Christians were drawn to these wondrous figures and knew full well their importance and power.

Many children grow up being taught that angels are always watching out for them. More than likely, this belief is based on the actions of the angels during that first Christmas. The angels were portrayed as beings of grace, beauty, compassion, knowledge, and power—who wouldn't want someone like that on their side? And since that time two thousands years ago, millions have longingly looked to the heavens during moments of crisis, hoping that an angel would come to guide them as well.

The image of angels as watchkeepers had to have been very important to the early Christians. As these people were living in times when persecution or death could come at any moment, knowing that the angels who would one day trumpet