

The Poinsettia

The poinsettia has become a familiar Christmas symbol, but realize for how short a time it was been a part of our Christmas décor. In 1829, Dr. Joel Robert Poinsett, having spent four years as U.S. Minister to Mexico, returned to his home in Charleston, S.C. He brought with him a beautiful vermilion plant which covers the hillsides of Mexico. The flower became popular and when in the hands of skillful gardeners, it was at its height of beauty at Christmastime. Mexicans regarded the poinsettia as the flower of the Holy Night. So bring in the Poinsettias, its red color symbolize the life giving blood of Christ. Its golden center reminding us that in Christ we have a Heavenly Home.

Hymn of the Holy Night *"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"* UMH 218

The Christmas Card

Exchanging Christmas cards began in 1843, when an English illustrator created the first Christmas card. It resembled a postcard and showed a large family enjoying a Christmas celebration. The message on the card read, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you." About 1,000 cards were sold that very first year. By 1860, the custom of exchanging Christmas cards had spread throughout the United Kingdom. The first Christmas cards manufactured in the United States were made in 1875 by Lewis Prang, a German-born Boston printer.

We continue this custom by exchanging cards among our church family.

The Creche

Sometimes we are so busy that we forget the true meaning of Christmas, and why we celebrate it by giving gifts and joyously decorating, and only glancing at a nativity scene, without giving it a second thought. That is the way that it seemed to Francis of Assisi long ago. To help the people feel their true love of Christ, he arranged a life-sized nativity scene in a cave near his town. So it became a custom to use the nativity scene, called a crèche, at many times and places to help us remember Christ at Christmas.

Scripture Reading Luke 2:1-20

Hymn *"Away in a Manger"* UMH 217



The Hanging of the Greens

The Meaning of the Service

About 2,000 years ago, a clutch of sleepy shepherds were watching over their sheep on a star-brightened hillside in Palestine. It was a still, uneventful night. Suddenly, the darkness was filled with strange light. The stillness was broken by angel voices singing, "Glory to God in the Highest, on earth peace, good will to men!" So began our most beautiful and meaningful religious festival, Christmas.

Christmas actually begins with Advent, the season that we are beginning today. The season of Advent is a time of looking both to the past at the first coming of Christ, God's physical entrance into our world, and looking into the future, when Christ returns to our world. The Christmas season has a long history, with customs that have developed through many centuries. Old customs and observances have been refined, renewed, and replaced with new ones. Some of our customs have pagan origins, but have been "converted" by redefinition of their meanings. What is significant for us today is not what they may once have meant, but rather what they mean for us today.

Today our church building will begin to wear its Christmas apparel. For the first time this season, our Christmas tree stands in the sanctuary. Today for the first time its lights will shine for us. We make ready for the birthday of the King, much as we would make ready for a banquet with a royal host, by dressing in our best apparel. We are mindful that, although it is not yet Christmas, it will be here soon, very soon.

As we decorate the church, not only will we explain the history of the symbols of this special season, but we will dedicate these symbols – and ourselves – to the glory of God and His Son.

The Candles

The candles and their light are symbols of the Light of the World, who came at Christmas. They remind us also of the Star in the first Christmas sky. The custom of burning candles goes back to the ancient times when candles were used to celebrate joyous occasions and festivals. Early Romans exchanged candles as gifts. Even today, after the invention of electricity the simple beauty of a lit candle reflects the light of Christ in the lives of His people.

Hymn *“The Light of the World is Jesus”*

on screen

The Advent Wreath

One special use of candles is found in the Advent Wreath. It is a special sign that the people are preparing their hearts for the coming of Christmas. The wreath, the symbol of Eternal Life, is combined with candles, the sign of the Light of the World. There are four Sundays in Advent, so the wreath has four candles, one for each Sunday in the Advent season. Traditionally, one candle is lit each Sunday, until all four are lit on the Sunday before Christmas. The white candle in the center is the Christ Candle, the symbol of the coming Messiah, and will be lit on Christmas Eve.

Hymn of Advent *“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”*

UMH 196

Lighting of the Advent Candle

The Bells

Bells probably did not exist in Europe before the time of Christ, but in China, bells of some sort have been used for more than 4,000 years. The cup-shaped bells date from the fourth century. Its first use was to summon Christians to worship. Bells have always been associated with religious services and joyous occasions, with wedding bells being the most common use today. What is more joyous than the ringing of the bells as they toll forth good tidings, heralding the birth of Christ in tones of love? So ring out, ye bells, of peace on earth, good will to men.

Hymn of the Bells *“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”*

on screen

The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is the symbol of peace and endless life. One of the most beautiful legends surrounding the tree is about Saint Winfred. When Saint Winfred reached North England, he found the people worshiping oak trees. To show the people the falseness of their beliefs, he chopped down a great oak. Behind the tree stood a small fir. Pointing to the fir, he said, “This shall be your holy tree.” It is a sign of endless life, for it’s leaves are always green.

The Chrismon Tree began as an offering to God. God blessed the offering and it became a song of praise and thanksgiving to Him. It

continues as a witness to His love and glory, as a proclamation of His Holy Name through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Chrismon is a combination of two words: Christ and Monogram. And it is just that, a monogram of Christ. White Chrismons refer to our Lord’s purity and perfection, Gold, to His majesty and glory. We point to Christ as the Light of the World, by using tiny white lights on the tree. One our Chrismon Tree, there is a light for each member of the church, in addition to extras for visitors and potential members.

Song of Remembrance *“O Chrismon Tree”*

(sung to the tune of *“O Christmas Tree”*)

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

How lovely are your branches,

With Chrismons large and Chrismons small, Each with a story to recall.

On the Chrismon Tree, one Chrismon says, “Jesus was born Emmanuel!”

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

How lovely are your branches

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

With Chrismons white for Purity

The manger tells of Jesus’ birth, Born to save the ones of earth.

On the Chrismon Tree, one Chrismon says, “I am the shepherd, follow me”

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

With Chrismons white for Purity.

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

With Chrismons gold for Royalty.

The lustrous pearls and brilliant gold

Tell the story often told, On the Chrismon Tree, one Chrismon says,

“Jesus triumphant o’er the earth”

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

With Chrismons gold for Royalty.

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

You hold the Christian symbols,

The golden crown, the fish, the star

Guided the wise men from afar.

On the Chrismon Tree, one Chrismon says, “Hosanna to our Lord and King”

O Chrismon Tree, O Chrismon Tree!

You hold the Christian symbols.