



CHRISTMAS

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction and Historical Information

In Roman history, the Chronography of 354 A.D. lists December 25 as the date for a Christian liturgical feast celebrating the birth of Jesus. This celebration may have been influenced by more ancient harvest festivals such as Saturnalia, when food, fellowship, special decorations, music, and gift-giving were integrated into the commemoration of ancient gods and the festivities of the harvest. By 1100 A.D., Christmas had become the most significant religious celebration in Europe. By the nineteenth century, Christmas had evolved from the raucous and somewhat drunken revelries of the Middle Ages to a family-and-children-focused practice of faith and feasting.

Such celebrations were, and are, a far cry from the practices of John the Baptist as he “came to testify to the light.” John walked boldly as the forerunner of Christ, yet humbly as God’s

messenger; he lived a simple life directed toward enlightening those who would repent of their sins and be baptized. John prepared the way for the coming of Jesus.

John the Baptist was ordained by God as the messenger of the coming of the foretold Messiah, Jesus. His duty, proclaimed from the time of his conception by aged parents Elizabeth and Zechariah, was to prepare the Jewish community for the miracle of the Messiah's coming. It was his responsibility to turn their hearts and minds toward the ways of righteousness and the wisdom of being ready for the Coming of the Lord.

Like Jesus, who was his kinsman, John was named by God, in an angelic proclamation to his father, Zechariah. Like Jesus, John had many followers, but John had no disciples to carry on his work. That work included baptism of those who had repented of sin, to purify their bodies as they sought to purify their lives.

According to Harold W. Attridge, the Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament and Dean of Yale Divinity School, there were many teachers who were performing cleansing baptisms at the time when Jesus took this step toward his own ministry. But baptism by John carried with it a unique connection to prophecy and eschatology. Among the teachers of the time, John was solely responsible for a baptism of repentance and forgiveness in preparation for an imminent judgment by God. And to John came one without sin, so that he could witness that Jesus was "the Son of God" (John 1:34).

John the Baptizer, John the Forerunner, John the Precursor, baptized Jesus, the One for whom he had prepared a way. His many followers and his prophecy of change apparently made him a political and moral threat to Herod Antipas, King of Judea, who eventually ended John's life. But this did not stop the work and walk of Jesus. Instead, John's life was a declaration, a trumpet calling the faithful to prepare to receive the greatest gift of God. His baptism of Jesus initiated a ministry that has circumvented and enriched the world.

The faith demonstrated by John, and his call to bring others to repentance, forgiveness, and responsible action, can be a template for our families and community to follow at Christmas. This Christmas, with intentionality, let us prepare our families and community for the commemoration of the birth of Christ.

II. Autobiographical Stories

The following are two short stories from personal experiences. The first is my own, from my memories of Christmas spent with relatives at my great-grandparents' home in East Liverpool, Ohio. Jerome and Essie Arkward were two of the dearest blessings in my life. The story is titled "Lights for Christmas." Even if our great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, or mentors are not with us, sharing the stories of loving elders keeps them and their gifts alive for our families. Begin a tradition of family-story gifts by telling them each Christmas Eve, before or after reading the story of the birth of Christ.

Lights for Christmas

One Christmas, when I was still too young to do much more than get in the way in the kitchen, I sat on Great-Grandpop's thin lap and looked at the pictures in the funny papers. The house was full of the sounds and smells of the season: Mom and the womenfolk fussing over the dishes and dessert; the menfolk arguing as they reminisced, each with his own version of the same story; cousins sneaking pieces of leftover turkey, its scent mingling with sweet potato and cinnamon, breads and pies, mints and after-dinner coffee, and my Great-Grandpop explaining the newspaper's cartoons to me.

I interrupted him and asked the question that had been on my mind ever since we'd walked the many steps to his front door, "Great-pop, how come you don't have lights on your house like the other people do? The neighbors have lights in their windows and on their porches. And some of 'em even put white lights on the roof! But you and Great-Grandma just have the reg'lar ol' lamps on, and nobody can see your Christmas tree. Why don't you put lights outside, or put your tree close to the window?"

Great-Grandpop smiled; he didn't answer right away. It seemed like he was waiting for just the right words to come to him. Plates clinked and silverware rattled on the kitchen table, a signal that it was almost time for pie and ice cream. Somebody sang, somebody laughed. Somebody harmonized to the song.

With his eyes closed, Great-Grandpop listened for a while. Then he put his lips close to my ear, as if he was sharing a secret. Great-Grandpop said, "Little girl, you can't see Christmas on the outside of things, no matter how many lights you put up. Christmas isn't in the lights; it isn't in all the decorations. Christmas makes its own light, inside. You have to come inside, and get yourself warmed up inside. When you feel that warmth inside you, that's when you really see Christmas."

A True Story of Christmas, 2010

by James Arter, local artist and children's advocate, Columbus, Ohio
(Shared with permission and deep gratitude)

I opened my e-mails this morning to find a notice from Franklin County Children's Services. Seems it was time to update my fingerprint records. For the past 3 years I have been mentoring a young man, Darius, soon to be adopted by a family out of state, and if I want to continue seeing him or work with other youth I would need to update my fingerprint records immediately. I called the volunteer coordinator and arranged to see her for my fingerprinting at 10 a.m.

I first connected with Franklin County Children Services a couple of decades ago when Lamont, another young boy I mentored in the after-school art program, fell under the care of FCCS. I met Lamont when he was age 6; at age 8, it was necessary for FCCS to become involved in his life. Lamont's case was given to Ms. Long. Lamont was the first client Ms. Long received when she began her career with FCCS. Lamont, Ms. Long, and I forged a bond that has lasted all these years. In June 2011 Lamont will be 26 years of age and he now has two boys of his own, ages 5 and 8.

When I arrived at 10 a.m. to FCCS, not only was the volunteer coordinator waiting for me but Ms. Long was as well. It was a warm reunion. I shared the latest info about Lamont, that he had recently been hit by an SUV, suffered fractured hips, a broken ankle, and some other minor injuries, and was now at home using a walker. I shared with her that Lamont and I had recently gone to a local Thrift Store, where I purchased coats, hats, gloves, and a few toys for the boys for Christmas. Due to the cold weather, the boys and their father received the winter coats and clothing early, while the few used toys and games remained wrapped and waiting to make their debut on Christmas Day.

While I was getting fingerprinted, Ms. Long said that she wanted to check on something and told me not to leave. When she returned, she said Lamont's boys qualified for some free new toys through the agency. Each boy was to receive a large leaf/lawn-size bag filled with games and toys. With a lump in my throat, I said thank you as we filled the bags.

I had to use a large mail cart to get the bags to my car. When I returned, Ms. Long said she had checked the records and found that each of the boys could also receive a brand-new bicycle! Now I had tears in my eyes. I just couldn't believe how all of this was happening when all I expected was to get my fingerprints taken!

My dilemma was that there was no room in my car for the bikes. Problem solved—they had a van that would follow me to the house with the bikes. They did ask a favor of me. It happened that the people who provide the new bikes to the children had just arrived and were going to do an interview with Channel 4 news—would I please be a part of the interview? Well of course! This was so little to ask for so much received.

The finishing touch to this story happened just as we were about to walk the bikes out of the building to the van. The PA system had been playing popular Christmas carols earlier, and, right on cue, Judy Garland started to sing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Now I had a lump in my throat, tears in my eyes, and goose bumps.

I just had to share this story with you...it is still hard to imagine, but true.

(The actual names of the youth and caseworker in the story have been changed.)

III. Poetry, Quotations, Prose, Christmas Ideas, and Books

What Makes Christmas?

Author Unknown

"What makes Christmas?"

I asked my soul,

And this answer came back to me:

"It is the Glory of heaven

Come down in the hearts of humanity—

Come in the spirit and heart of a Child,

And it matters not what we share

At Christmas; it isn't Christmas at all
Unless the Christ child be there."

Christmas Carol

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ring out, ye bells!
All Nature swells
With gladness of the wondrous story,
The world was lorn,
But Christ is born
To change our sadness into glory.

Sing, earthlings, sing!
Tonight a King
Hath come from heaven's high throne to bless us.
The outstretched hand
O'er all the land
Is raised in pity to caress us.

Come at His call;
Be joyful all;
Away with mourning and with sadness!
The heavenly choir
With holy fire
Their voices raise in songs of gladness.

The darkness breaks
And dawn awakes,
Her cheeks suffused with youthful blushes.
The rocks and stones
In holy tones
Are singing sweeter than the thrushes.

Then why should we
In silence be,
When Nature lends her voice to praises;
When heaven and earth
Proclaim the truth
Of Him for whom that lone star blazes?

No, be not still,
But with a will
Strike all your harps and set them ringing;
On hill and heath

Let every breath
Throw all its power into singing!¹

Quotations

“It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you...yes, it is Christmas every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand.”

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), humanitarian,
Roman Catholic nun and founder of the Missionaries of Charity

“The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.”

—Ralph Sockman (1889–1970), United Methodist pastor and author

“May each of you prepare the way; for God has blessed us just as he blessed Zechariah. May you receive the gift of salvation, may you walk in the light of Jesus Christ, and may you experience God’s peace.”

—Dr. Keith Wagner, Senior Pastor at St. Paul’s United
Church of Christ, Sidney, Ohio

Ideas for Christmas

Share a gift of story that connects to the importance of leadership, strength of character, and the celebration of the holy season. An example is Lerone Bennett Jr.’s article “Free for Christmas: Harriet Tubman leads slave escape and gives the greatest gift of the holiday season” was first printed as a short story in his book, Great Moments in Black History, published in 1979.

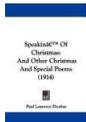
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_2_58/ai_97729819/?tag=content:coll

Books

For teens through adults



Dunbar, Paul Laurence. Chris'mus Is a Comin', and Other Poems. New York, NY: Dodd (Dodd, Mead and Company), 1905.



Dunbar, Paul Laurence. Speakin' o' Christmas, and Other Christmas and Special Poems. New York, NY: Dodd (Dodd, Mead and Company), 1914.

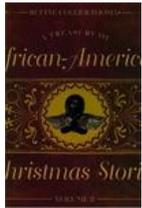


Jakes, T. D. Follow the Star: Christmas Stories That Changed My Life. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003.

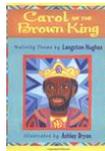
For children through adults



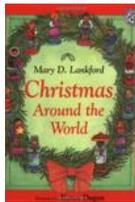
Brown, Margaret Wise. A Child is Born. New York, NY: Hyperion Books, 2000.



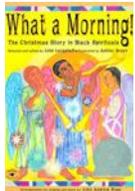
Collier-Thomas, Bettye. A Treasury of African American Christmas Stories. Philadelphia, PA: Henry Holt Publishing, 1997.



Hughes, Langston. Carol of the Brown King: Nativity Poems. Illustrated by Ashley Bryan. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1998.



Langford, Mary D. Christmas around the World. New York, NY: William Morrow & Co., 1998.



Langstaff, John. What a Morning: The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals. Illustrated by Ashley Bryan. Songs arranged for piano by John Andrew Moss. New York, NY: Aladdin Picture Books, 1996.



Onyefulu, Ifeoma. An African Christmas. London, UK: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2005.



Samuels, Allison. Christmas Soul: African American Holiday Stories. New York, NY: Hyperion, 2001.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Pray On

by J. W. Work

In the river of Jordan John baptized
How I long to be baptized
In the river of Jordan John baptized
Unto the dying Lamb

Pray on! Pray on!
Pray on! You mourning souls
Pray on! Pray on
Unto the dying Lamb

We baptize all that come by faith
How I long to be baptized
We baptize all that come by faith
Unto the dying Lamb

Here's another one come to be baptized
How I long to be baptized
Here's another one come to be baptized
Unto the dying Lamb²

Renditions of the song "Last Month of the Year" have been sung by Odetta, the Staple Singers, and several Bluegrass groups. It speaks of the time of year that in the United States is traditionally the month of Christmas celebrations. Although some belief systems throughout the world celebrate the Mass of Christ on January 6 (for example, those of the Eastern Orthodox faith), Americans of African heritage observed December 25 as the holy day of Jesus' birth with festivities at the end of the year, as did those Americans whose ancestors came from Europe.

Last Month of the Year

Traditional

Tell me when was Jesus born?
Last month of the year.
When was Jesus born?
Last month of the year.
Tell me when was Jesus born?

Last month of the year.

Chorus:

Well, wasn't January, February, March, April or May
June, July, August, September, October, November
It was the 25th of December
Last month of the year.

He was born to the Virgin Mary
Last month of the year.
He was born to the Virgin Mary
Last month of the year.
He was born to the Virgin Mary
Last month of the year.

Chorus:

Wasn't January, February, March, April or May
June, July, August, September, October, November
It was the 25th day of December
Last month of the year.

Rise Up Shepherd and Follow

Author Unknown

There's a star in the East on Christmas morn
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
It will lead to the place where the Christ was born
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Chorus:

Follow, follow, rise up, shepherd, and follow
Follow the Star of Bethlehem
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

If you take good heed to the angel's words
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
You'll forge your flocks, you'll forget your herds
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

Chorus:

Follow, follow, rise up, shepherd, and follow
Follow the Star of Bethlehem
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.³

V. Projects for the Season

Just as John was a messenger who prepared the way for Jesus, our families can share the good news of and prepare the way to Christmas for themselves and others through simple activities. Here are a few examples:

- Select age-appropriate readings and stories from sections II and III above. Read a short story or a chapter or portion of a selection, then discuss it with children and/or family members. Is there a lesson in the reading? How does the selection relate to the work of John the Baptist as messenger for Christ, or the birth of Jesus?
- Read a hymn, carol, or spiritual as poetry. Discuss its meaning or message and its connections to the biblical story of Jesus' birthday; the lives of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph or John, Elizabeth, and Zechariah; or the good feelings of the Christmas season. If possible, sing the song or listen to it.
- Write Christmas cards as a family, assigning duties such as selecting, signing, addressing, stamping envelopes, etc., to each family member. Talk about the importance of staying in touch with family members and friends near and far. Permit younger family members to make and sign small illustrations to insert in the cards; encourage older family members to write personal notes on small Post-It notes to add to the cards. Take the cards to the post office together.
- Read and view Christmas cards together at the table each day, or after Christmas dinner. Pray for each person who sent a card to the family.
- Volunteer as a family at a local food pantry or kitchen.
- Sing carols with elders in an adult-care facility.
- Create a group gift list of one thing each person can do for others in the community (examples: picking up trash; cutting grass; shopping for elders; helping to clean the church basement; walking dogs, etc.). Create a second list of what each person can do to make life easier in the family (examples: arguing less, listening and discussing more; helping others with their chores; preparing one meal each week; giving a compliment to others at the end of each day; saying "I love you," etc.). Create a third list of reasonable ideas for family outings, one or two from each family member. Post these lists in a place where they can easily be seen, and make time to do the activities listed, regardless of whose idea each activity was.
- Place a laundry basket near the washing machine for clothing that can be donated to a local homeless shelter or other charitable organization. Place a jar on the kitchen counter for loose change that can be donated to the Sunday School or a charitable organization. When the jar is filled, help younger family members to count and roll this change so that it can be taken to the bank for conversion to cash, and make sure all family members are thanked for helping with the donation.

- Bake bread together. Talk about John the Baptist's simple diet (honey and locust or locust-tree pods) and how difficult it would be to find food in the wilderness as John did. Explain the importance of bread as a staple of meals around the world. Cut slices while the bread is still warm, and drizzle honey over them before eating. Thank God for the convenience of kitchens and stores and supplies that we don't have to find, catch, or grow unless we wish to do so.
- Consider decorating miniature artificial Christmas trees for the elders in your family or for hospital or homebound patients. Offer to decorate the tree at an adult-care facility or any facility where a Christmas tree might be set up.
- From Thanksgiving through Christmas Eve, write Bible verses on strips of white construction paper. On Christmas Eve, glue or tape these strips together as a paper chain for the mantle or tree.
- Bake a birthday cake for the baby Jesus, reminding family members that there would be no Christmas without Christ's birth.

VI. Audio Visual Aids

A free sheet music download of the first two verses of *Last Month of the Year* is available at http://btcomm.com/familychristmasonline/music/african_american_carols/last_month.pdf

A free download of *Rise Up, Shepherd and Follow* is available at <http://www.8notes.com/scores/1548.asp>

Information on the history of Christmas and 21 video clips are available at <http://www.history.com/topics/Christmas>

VII. Resources for Further Study

Pearse, Roger. *The Chronography of 354 A.D. – The Tertullian Project*, 2006. Online location: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chronology_of_354_04_planets_and_days.htm

A Portrait of Jesus' World and John the Baptist. Online location <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/john.html>

Swartz, B.K., Jr. *The Origin of American Christmas Myth and Customs*. Online location: <http://web.archive.org/web/20110430004539/http://www.bsu.edu/web/01bkswartz/xmaspub.html>

Crossan, John Dominic. *God and Empire*. London: HarperCollins, 2007.

Hanson, Brooks. *John the Baptizer: A Novel*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.

Murphy, Catherine M. John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Crossan, John Dominic. God and Empire. London: HarperCollins, 2007.

Hanson, Brooks. John the Baptizer: A Novel. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.

Murphy, Catherine M. John the Baptist: Prophet of Purity for a New Age. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003.

Notes

1. Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "Christmas Carol." Online location:

<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/13267/>

2. Work, J. W. "Pray On." American Negro Songs. New York, NY: Bonanza Books, 1940.

3. The author of "Rise up Shepherd and Follow" is unknown. A choral-response song, it is said to have been first published in Slave Songs of the United States, edited by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison in 1867.