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# What is Christmas?

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By Mary Cummins

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# WHAT IS CHRISTMAS?

In many places in the world, Christmas is probably the most popular holiday in the year, especially for Christians. It is very nostalgic for many people—the sights, the sounds, the smells and time spent with family and friends.

Since Canada is in the Northern Hemisphere, Christmas comes in the winter season. Thus, we associate Christmas with the cold and snow, winter sports like skating, making a snowman, warming up by a fire and drinking hot chocolate. This is what we call “seasonal” Christmas.

Children have happy memories of Santa Claus bringing them presents. There are also family traditions such as putting up a tree and decorating it, putting up lights outside the house, getting together with family and friends and of course, eating a big dinner that includes turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, salads, vegetables and for dessert pumpkin pie and whipped cream. Yummy! We like to watch Christmas movies such as, “It’s a Wonderful Life” All of these things are what we call “secular” Christmas.

Finally, there is what we call “sacred” Christmas. This means that we remember the very first Christmas when the baby Jesus was born. Anything about this event, such as Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, Bethlehem, the angels, the star, the shepherds, the wise men etc. is part of the very first Christmas and is sacred.

Sometimes it’s confusing to newcomers because they see and hear so many things around Christmas time—lights, trees, bells, decorations, Santa Clauses in malls, presents, shopping, food, people singing carols and so on. They must wonder what it’s all about. Christmas cards show pictures of seasonal, secular and sacred things and the many Christmas songs tell us about all these things too.

This booklet is meant to help you see the differences.

—created by Mary Cummins

# SEASONAL CHRISTMAS

## Winter Wonderland

The famous Christmas song *Winter Wonderland* was first published in 1934. The composer was Felix Bernard (1897-1944) and the lyricist was Richard B. Smith (1901-1935).

The lyrics of *Winter Wonderland* contributed to the magical vision of snow at Christmas—and together with the tradition of building snowmen, turned fantasy into reality by creating a real Winter Wonderland.

### Lyrics:

Sleigh bells ring, are you listening  
In the lane, snow is glistening  
A beautiful sight,  
We're happy tonight  
Walking in a winter wonderland

Gone away is the bluebird  
Here to stay is a new bird  
Who sings a love song  
As we go along  
Walking in a winter wonderland

In the meadow we can build a snowman  
And pretend that he is Parson Brown  
He'll say, "Are you married?"  
We'll say, "No man,  
But you can do the job  
When you're in town."

Later on, we'll conspire  
As we dream by the fire  
To face unafraid  
The plans that we've made  
Walking in a winter wonderland

# White Christmas

The song *White Christmas* is undoubtedly the most famous and popular of all the secular Christmas songs. The music and lyrics for *White Christmas* were written by Irving Berlin in 1942 and originally featured in the movie *Holiday Inn* starring Bing Crosby. The lyrics of *White Christmas* struck a chord with the soldiers fighting in the Second World War and their families who were waiting for them back home.

## Lyrics:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
Just like the ones I used to know  
Where the treetops glisten  
And children listen  
To hear sleigh bells in the snow

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
With every Christmas card I write  
May your days be merry and bright  
And may all your Christmases be white

**Repeat both verses**

# Jingle Bells

## **Lyrics:**

Dashing through the snow  
In a one-horse open sleigh  
O'er the fields we go  
Laughing all the way  
Bells on Bob-tail ring  
Making spirits bright  
What fun it is to ride and sing  
A sleighing song tonight

## **Chorus:**

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one-horse open sleigh—HEY!

Jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one-horse open sleigh

# SECULAR CHRISTMAS

## Is There Really a Santa Claus?

Many children think Santa Claus will come to their house on Christmas Eve, land on their roof with his 8 reindeer and a sleigh full of toys, then go down the chimney to leave toys for them under the Christmas tree. After, he will go back up the chimney to fly away in his sleigh back to the North Pole where he lives. This is all impossible.

There is no real Santa Claus, but the idea started with a real man. Long ago in AD 280-343 there was a priest in Patara, Greece by the name of Saint Nicholas. (Currently, this area is on the Southern coast of Turkey.) He was very kind and liked to help poor people. He became famous in the Eastern Church and December 6<sup>th</sup> is known as St. Nicholas' Day.

In the 1500's, settlers from Holland immigrated to New Amsterdam in the United States. They brought their tradition of St. Nicholas with them, but they called him Sinter Klass. Over time the name changed to Santa Claus.

There is a famous book called *Twas the Night Before Christmas*. It describes what the imaginary Santa looks like. If you go to any mall, you will probably see a man dressed like Santa Claus. Children go and sit on his lap and tell him what they want for Christmas.

Even though there isn't really a Santa Claus, the idea of giving is a very important part of Christmas.

# 'Twas the Night Before Christmas

By Clement Moore

Listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzIF4eYRkg>

## Reading:

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse

The stockings all hung by the chimney with care  
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there

The children were nestled all safe in their beds  
While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads

And mom in her 'kerchief and I in my cap  
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter  
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter

Away to the window I flew like a flash  
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow  
Gave the lustre of midday to objects below

When what to my wondering eyes should appear  
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer

With a little old driver so lively and quick  
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick

More rapid than eagles his coursers they came  
As he whistled and shouted and called them by name

Now, Dasher! Now, Dancer! Now, Prancer! Now, Vixen!  
On, Comet! On, Cupid! On, Donner and Blitzen

To the top of the porch, to the top of the wall  
Now dash away, dash away, dash away all

As dry leaves before the wild hurricane fly  
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky

So up to the house-top the coursers they flew  
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too

And then in a twinkling, I heard on the roof  
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof

As I drew in my head and was turning around  
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound

He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot  
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot

A bundle of toys he had flung on his back  
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack

His eyes, how they twinkled; his dimples, how merry  
His cheeks were like roses; his nose, like a cherry

His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow  
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow

The stump of his pipe he held tight in his teeth  
And the smoke—it encircled his head like a wreath

He had a broad face and a round little belly  
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf  
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself

A wink of his eye and a twist of his head  
Soon gave me to know, I had nothing to dread

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work  
And filled all the stockings, then turned with a jerk

And laying a finger alongside his nose  
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose

He sprang to his sleigh; to his team gave a whistle  
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle

But I heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight  
*"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night."*

# Santa Claus is Coming to Town

Listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSmsq2iq4bQ>

## Lyrics:

You better watch out  
You better not cry  
Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town

He's making a list  
And checking it twice  
Gonna find out who's naughty or nice  
Santa Claus is coming to town

## Repeat

He sees you when you're sleeping  
He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good  
So be good for goodness sake

Ohhh...You better watch out  
You better not cry  
Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town

# Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

Listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0byH9h1CIBY>

## Lyrics:

You know Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen  
Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen  
But do you recall the most famous reindeer of all?

Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose  
And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows

All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names  
They never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games

Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say  
"Rudolph with your nose so bright, won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"

Then how the reindeer loved him, as they shouted out with glee  
Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, you'll go down in history!

# SACRED CHRISTMAS

When you hear “Christmas,” you might think of Santa Claus and Christmas cake. But that is not what Christmas is really about.

The word *Christmas* comes from the word *Christ*. This is a title given to Jesus and it means anointed one. Long ago, Christmas was called *the mass of Christ*, which means the celebration of Christ's birth. Christmas is one of the two most important Christian holidays in the year, and is celebrated by most people on December 25th. However, many Orthodox Christians in Canada celebrate Christmas Day on or near January 7<sup>th</sup> in the Gregorian calendar. This date works out to be December 25<sup>th</sup> in the Julian calendar—pre-dating the Gregorian calendar.

## The First Christmas Story

Long ago Jewish prophets wrote about the coming of the anointed one. They called him the Messiah. They waited for him for hundreds and hundreds of years.

This is how it finally happened...

God chose a young Jewish woman named Mary to be the mother of this Messiah. Mary was planning to marry a Jewish man named Joseph. One day an angel named Gabriel told Mary that she was going to become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her baby would be the Son of God, and his name was to be Jesus, which means “The Lord saves.”

Soon after this, the Emperor of the country ordered all the people to go back to their family hometowns to be counted. Mary and Joseph went to their hometown which was Bethlehem. There was no room for them to stay in an inn (hotel), so they stayed in a stable with many animals. While there, Mary gave birth to Jesus.

On that same night, an angel appeared to some shepherds who were watching their sheep. The angel told them Jesus, the Saviour, was born in Bethlehem. The angel also told them they would find baby Jesus in a manger. Then many angels appeared and praised God. The shepherds went to find Jesus.

Later, wise men came from the East looking for Jesus. God sent a bright star to guide them to Bethlehem. By the time they came, Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in a house. The wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to give to Jesus. This is where the idea of giving gifts started.

This was the very first Christmas. Since then, many countries have customs for celebrating Christmas. They are interesting and fun, but the main point about Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth over 2000 years ago.

# Silent Night

This song is probably the most popular of sacred Christmas songs (called carols). It was written in German in 1818 in a village near Salzburg, Austria, and later translated to many languages.

**On YouTube search for:** Silent Night by Susan Boyle

## Lyrics:

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon virgin mother and child

Holy infant, so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night

Shepherds quake at the sight

Glories stream from heaven afar

Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia

Christ the Saviour is born

Christ the Saviour is born

**(I haven't given you all the verses here)**

# Joy To The World

The lyrics for this popular carol were written in 1719 by Isaac Watts (1674-1748). The music was composed by George Fredrick Handel (1685-1759). He is the same Handel who wrote the famous *Handel's Messiah* sung at Christmas time.

## Lyrics:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come  
Let earth receive her King  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And heaven and nature sing  
And heaven and nature sing  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns  
Let men their songs employ  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy  
Repeat the sounding joy  
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy

No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as the curse is found  
Far as, far as, the curse is found

He rules the world with truth and grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders of His love  
And wonders, wonders, of His love