

# Winter: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

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## The Season of Advent

Waiting period until the arrival of Christ (from the Latin 'adventus' - arrival); four weeks, i.e. four Advent Sundays before Christmas

**Advent means time of waiting** for the 'arrival' (from Latin 'advenire' = arrive) of the Messiah, an analogy of the time of waiting of the people of Israel in the OT.

Note: Judaism is not the only religion in which a future redeemer is expected. For example, in Persia Zarathustra already heralded it 600 BC. In the observatory in Sippar similar predictions were found written on clay tablets. The Roman poet Virgil wrote in his poem, the 4. Eclogues, that a salutary child shall be born during the impending world change (roughly 40 BC).

Is shaped by heralds of the **light of the world**:

**Isaiah**, prophet of the OT, 700 BC, who hints at the future great light (Isaiah, 9,1-7)

**Angels**, see Christmas Story, (see Matthew 1,18-24; 2,1-23 and Luke 1,5-80; 2,1-52)

**Saint Nicholas** (Saint Nicholas day, 6. December → see section on Nicholas), brings light through knowledge and introspection

**Lucy** (Saint Lucy's Day, 13. December → see section on Lucy), carries the light of hope into the darkness

**Simeon** (Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, 2. February → see section on the Presentation), the aged prophet Simeon praises baby Jesus as light for all people → later on the **grown up Jesus** calls himself the light of the world.

The Christmas Story belongs at the beginning of the Advent. In particular children should know why Advent and Christmas are celebrated: See Matthew 1, 18-24; 2,1-23 and Luke 1, 5-80; 2,1-52, as well as picture books.

Nowadays the Advent is celebrated during four weeks, however earlier it was often-times a six weeks fasting period like lent, starting on Saint Martin's Day (= end of the fiscal year with wages and presents) 11.11 to the 6.1.: **Sunday of the Year** = 1/7 of the year (fallowing season in nature, rest period, holy time)

## 21.12 = beginning of winter

**Customs:** Advent wreaths and many other Christmassy decorations, crafts, Advent's calendar, window decorations, dip / pour candles, Christmas lights, Christmas trees, Advent pastries, fragrances (fir, orange, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, pepper ...), Advent stories and poems, carolling, Christmas concerts, Nativity figurines, Nativity plays ect.

## Barbara

4. December: Anniversary of the martyr Barbara, for whose honour bare branches are put in Water which with a little bit of luck will bloom on Christmas.

## Nicholas

6. December (in certain European countries partially also 24. December): Festival of the remembrance of Bishop Nicholas, patron saint and knight in shining armour.

## Nicholas – 6. December, in other European countries partially also on the 24. December

Bishop Nicholas of Myra (modern Demre in Turkey), whose name means victor of the people (niké = victory, laos = people) lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> century. He is revered in both the Orthodox and the Western church,

however he has a higher status in the Orthodox church and is acknowledged as similar to the apostles. To this day he is the best known popular saint on the whole world and is often portrayed in the secularised form of Santa Claus:

Mixture of a Christian popular saint with pre-Christian figures (e.g. God Wotan / Odin depicted with a beard and fat belly), creatures of nature and ancestors (see section on Twelvetide), with Father Frost and King of Winter.

Many different legends of Saint Nicholas are known, in time later Nicholas figures were incorporated into the tradition:

The two best known are the legend of the ship, in which Nicholas distributes corn to the starving population, and the legend of the impoverished sisters, for whom Nicholas paid the dowry (hanging the stocking on the fireplace is probably derived from this).

**Leitmotiv:** Give gifts to each other, stand by one another, encourage another. Strive for realization and insight.

**Preparing the Mood for Christmas:** In the best case Nicholas is a holy and dignified herald of baby Jesus, in the worst case a commercialised present-giver in comic book style, who calls for consumerism and distracts from the birth of Christ.

**Symbols:** Golden book of insight (Chronicle of the World), sack of gifts to be shared

**Customs:** The waxing importance of Nicholas in the Western church replaced the tradition of gift giving on Saint Martin's Day (11. November) after the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It was moved to 6. December, in some regions even Christmas, where even now Saint Nicholas distributes the presents.

As of the 13<sup>th</sup> century bishop game: Monastic students choose a child bishop who was allowed to reproach teachers. Processions, during which they begged for gift for the school. After the 14<sup>th</sup>/ 15<sup>th</sup> century this slowly turned into a family tradition, during which Nicholas rebukes and brings gifts for the children. Even nowadays he is accompanied by his dark servant (initially a winter demon), who carries a rod and sometimes even a chain. In some cases, if Nicholas stops by personally, children recite a poem in order to receive their gift.

Otherwise a boot is placed in front of the door, or a stocking hung in the fireplace (which are filled during the night), or Nicholas throws a bag full of surprises through the door, the window or the chimney and disappears unseen.

Depending on the country bread, ginger bread, or Christmas cookies are baked in the shape of Nicholas.

### **Lucy (*Lucia*)**

13. December: Festival in honour of the carrier of light, who illuminates the darkness.

### **Lucy (*Lucia*) (286-304) – 13. December**

Name from the Latin 'lux' = light

Note about the date: Until the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1582 (in Sweden 1752) the night on 13. December was regarded as the longest and darkest night / Midwinter night.

**Historical Facts:** Lucy lives in Syracuse in Sicily. She wanted to remain celibate, as a Christian she was persecuted and beheaded.

According to the legends she fed Christians who hid in the catacombs. In order to have both hands free, she carried a light affixed to her head. She is revered as carrier of light, and for that reason she is in some places seen as the female, heavenly and just counterpart of Lucifer, carries light and hope into the darkness of the world and is a herald of Christmas. Patron saint of the blind, sick and weavers.

Parallels to various pre-Christian mythological figures: Frau Holle, Perchta / Bertha, Frigg, Freya, Ostara, but also to the biblical "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars." (Revelation 12, 1 and 17) as well as the archangel Raphael (biblical Tobit-Story).

Additional names in other cultures: Lutzelfrau, Lussibrud, Lucienbraut, Lutscherl, Schnabelpercht, Pudelmutter, Butzenlutz, Nikoloweibl.

**Symbols:** Wreath of light, candles

**Leitmotif:** Bring light into the darkness, hope for the birth of the light on Christmas and for the victory of light in spring.

**Customs:** Dissemination from Rome to Sweden, festivals of light and processions in Italy, sew Lucia wheat in Germany and Sweden, prepare wheat dish in Sicily, floating of light in Germany and Switzerland, bride Lucia in Sweden (accompanied by bridesmaids / angels, star carriers, gingerbread men and Christmas dwarfs; earlier people dressed up a creature of light distributed the first Christmas pastries, today Lucia cats are baked), Lucia stool made from different types of wood in Hungary (being able to sit on it during Christmas mass and being able to look the devils or witches into the eyes).

## **Christmas Eve**

24. December: Eve before Christmas day, in some countries the actual Christmas celebration.

## **CHRISTMAS**

24./ 25. December: Celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, light of the world, anxiously awaited mediator of the new covenant with God, prophesied in the OT, Messiah (= the Anointed), saviour, redeemer, who shall overcome the primeval separation between the world of men and of God or between the realm of death and heaven.

## **CHRISTMAS**

**24. December** = Adam and Eve Day, memory of the Fall from Paradise, respectively the birth of the saviour

**25. December Christmas** = birthday celebration of the light of the world Jesus

**The date of birth** is not historically confirmed. It only stabilised during the 4<sup>th</sup> century. There are several explanations:

Combination with the Roman national day (of the unconquerable sun god)

Combination with the Jewish celebration of the consecration of the temple (according to Haggai 2,18)

Combination with the Celtic-Germanic Yule festival (Midwinter festival)

Calculated: Conception of Jesus on the beginning of spring (which was viewed as the beginning of all life) plus nine months = 25. December, birthday of Saint John the Baptist (according to the bible six months older than Jesus), therefore on 24. June.

## **Bible Matthew 1, 18-24; 2,1-23 and Luke 1, 5-80; 2,1-52:**

The gospel of Matthew tells the story of the three Magi (audience: Jewish Christians). The gospel of Luke tells the story of the shepherds (audience: heathen proselytes to Christianity)

The Christmas-stories are most likely not only legends. Independent historical sources correspond to certain indications in the bible and point towards true events (e.g. inscriptions about the census, astronomical calculations on cuneiform tablets ect. → most likely year of birth according to this 7 BC). Since the evangelist Luke, who carefully refers to his research, as a travel companion to Paul most likely visited the Ur-community (Acts 21,15) and therefore came into contact with the mother of Jesus and his brothers, it is highly unlikely that he took the freedom to simply make up the story of his birth. See also Epiphany.

**Customs:** Banquet, decorated Christmas tree (first mentioned in 1410, see also paradise tree next to the manger, earlier evergreen garlands and branches, originally probably harvest festival tree with sacrifices),

Christmas manger, singing songs, make music, read the Christmas story from the bible, tell stories and recite poems, gift giving (often times animals receive gifts as well, or a bowl with gruel is put outside for the benevolent brownie of the house), attend Christmas mass.

**Leitmotiv:** Gratefulness, joy, peace

**Symbols:** Lights (see section on Advent)

### **The Twelve Days of Christmas (Twelventide)**

25. December to 6. January = true Christmastime

#### **Twelve Days of Christmas (Twelventide)**

##### **25.12 to 6.1. = actual Christmastime**

During this special period, even in pre-Christian times often blessed or holy time, this side and the beyond are particularly close, heaven and earth touch, hoards of angels and sometimes even deceased accompany the devout people, strengthen us powers of Christ, path breaking or prophetic **dreams** can be received, the seed of the future can trickle into our souls\*. Cf. In the Christmas-story dreams play an important role.

The 12 days / nights are also put into connection with the Zodiac (forwards or backwards) and other cycles. For example each day a past month or a year can be meditated upon, or reversely, each day a future month or year can be divined or planned. To a certain degree we can begin our path at Christmas as naive shepherds and in the course of the 12 days and nights through a meditative glance on our biography grow into the wise Magi of the Epiphany, who strive for a development for the good of all.

For some the weather of the twelve days is prophetic of one month each of the new year.

The time of the 12 nights roughly makes the difference between the solar and the lunar year.

\* see to Norwegian ballad "The dream song of Olaf Åsteson" (a collection of old song stanzas passed down over centuries), which related cosmic experiences of Olaf, which he saw in dreams between Christmas Day and 6. January.

**Customs earlier:** Earlier spinning and weaving work had to be put to a rest, houses had to be sparkingly clean and often frankincense was burned. In certain region people dressed up as shaggy animal figures and in noisy processions chase away the winter demons. In the Nordic countries food for the former owners of the farm were put outside (see Swedish tomt / plot → as tomtar / house dwarves were viewed as former house owners), which were supposed to be watching particularly well over the farm, but also to appease other deceased / revenants (gengångare, draugr). Sheaves of grain were hung on trees and a bed of straw or even the own bed offered.

##### **Pre-Christian 'Wild Hunt'**

Evil spirits, billy goats, howling dogs or wolves and other eerie creatures walk through the land under the guidance of the Germanic Wotan (Scandinavia = Odin), who rides on his horse Sleipnir and spreads fear and fright across the land (howling winter storms).

However good spirits also walk the land, these on the other hand by spreading blessing and fertility in preparation of the coming spring. They are lead by Frau Holle / Perchta / Frigg (see also Freya, Lucia, Ostara,...= archetypal Ur-mother and representation of the divine-female qualities). Frau Holle is accompanied by the little folk (nature creatures), sometimes also by deceased or soon to be born souls of children. Woe to those who secretly spy on Holle/ Perchta – he will be blinded for at least a year; that is what old folk tales tell us. Lazy spinners or bad weavers are punished, since Frau Holle is the protector of home and hearth.

**Turn of the Year** (→ see section)

## Turn of the Year

31. December, Silvester / 1. January, New Year

**Turn of the Year** (only on 31. December / 1. January since 153 BC, beforehand in March)

**Customs:** Looking back and ahead, look at photos, share memories, together possibly create an image of the past year, say farewell to old things, come up with resolutions for the new year (write them down, draw them or look for a symbol of it, e.g. during a stroll through nature), oracles of the future in the form of for example pouring molten lead into water, drawing lots or angel cards, chink glasses at midnight with champagne, congratulations, church bells, fireworks

## Epiphany

6. January: Festival of the visitation of the Magi who sought out Christ and brought gifts to him.

**Epiphany**, Matthew 2,1-12

**Epiphany** (= divine apparition), Orthodox Christmas, initial anniversary of the Baptism in the Jordan River, Holle- / Perchta-Day

**Magi** of the bible = wise (Medic-Persian priestly astronomers), triad and the names of Melchior, Caspar, Balthazar are not passed down in the bible.

**Star** = astronomical event, probably a conjunction of Saturn (the star of the Jews) and Jupiter (star of the kings) in the zodiac Pisces (fertility and birth, countries by the seas, sign of the messiah) around 7 BC. During that time there was indeed the first large census of the Roman empire, as can be read in the gospel of Luke and can be confirmed from other sources. Already in the OT a 'star' is mentioned, and the event was calculated by the observatory in Sippar (finding of clay tablets with correct, astronomic calculations of the conjunction in combination with several proclamations about a meaningful birth). The description of the trajectory of the star in the bible on the way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem corresponds surprisingly well to the observable phenomenon (3. conjunction) in the sky, in particular the apparent standstill over the barn (= turning / reversal of a planet as seen from earth)

## Gifts:

Gold (love, knowledge, wisdom, power), matches Jesus, the heavenly king.

Frankincense (devotion, veneration, prayer), matches Jesus, the divine being.

Myrrh (Sacrifice, Devotion, Comfort, Healing) matches Jesus, the mortal human.

**Customs:** In many regions dancing around the Christmas tree for the last time and then taking down the decorations.

Epiphany carol singers, children dressed up as the Magi walk singing from door to door, paint the benediction character and the year on the door, C+M+B 2014 (Christus mansionem benedicat 2014 = Christ bless this house 2014) and sometimes collect donations for children in poor countries.

Bake three kings cake (5-8 balls of lightly sweetened yeast dough, arranged circularly around a larger middle piece): A bean or a plastic figurine is hidden in one of the balls. Whoever chooses the ball with the bean or figurine becomes king for one day and is allowed a wish or take responsibility for something.

With children: Cut out a crown and decorate it, craft a treasure box, transform the chair into a throne, listen to the story of the Epiphany and put it on as a play, tell each other about the dreams of the twelve nights and try to divine them, receive a final small gift.

Symbolically: **Departure on the personal royal road through the year** (the crown stands for wisdom and responsibility, the sceptre for autonomy and self-determination, the star for divine guidance and light in the dark) with the question: What is my personal 'gift' to Baby Jesus? What do I want to lay at its feet, how can I serve it?

The Magi are patron saints of travellers.

The German "Kasperle" handpuppet is originally based on Caspar, and used to have dark skin.

### **Valentine's Day**

14. February: Day of Friendship and anniversary of the martyr Saint Valentine (originally of the Roman goddess Juno)

### **Valentine's Day – 14. February**

Used to be dedicated to the Roman goddess Juno, as protector of family, marriage and the choice of the partner → Roman custom, pick a lot from a barrel to choose a random partner for the year, women of the family were given flowers on that day.

The customs were taken on in slightly altered form by Christianity, Juno Day became Valentine's Day (martyr from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century). In the Middle Ages young people would choose a Valentine / Valentina by lot.

To this day flowers are given on Valentine's Day, anonymous love letters are sent (England and the USA), divination of the beloved through oracle games and pastries in the form of hearts are given. It has become the **Day of Friendship**.

### **Carnival**

Riotous masquerade before the beginning of Lent.

Official start: 11.11, 11.11 O'clock (Martin's Day)

### **Pre-Christian Roots:**

Chasing away the winter demons with masks and noise (cf. 'Tschäggete' in Wallis, Switzerland)

### **Pre-Lent:**

For one last time stuff oneself with food, e.g. fatty 'Fastnachtsküchlein' or 'Fastensemmel' (Fat Thursday), slip into another role (dress up), scare others, be riotous and happy, try / celebrate the odd and funny, 'Guggenmusik', 'Schnitzelbank', masquerades, celebrate a time out, break rules .... unfortunately also danger of degeneration (alcohol abuse, cheating ect. → family drama)